



Raising Pigeons for Meat

Reviving the Forgotten Livestock

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Dedicated to the kind family and friends
who aided and sheltered us when they were all we had.



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Pigeons and Doves

Pigeons and Doves are in the same family of birds, with Pigeons being a little larger, depending upon breed. They are raised pretty much the same way in captivity, mating for life, laying two eggs at one time, requiring individual quarters (nesting areas), similar diet, etc. The names are often used interchangeably.

The domesticated Pigeons are descended from the European Rock Dove, including those that have gone feral (back to living wild). Truly wild doves in the US are native to the U.S.. **Pigeons have been bred in captivity and domesticated for centuries, even millennia. Many older cities of the world have extensive dovecotes for the pigeons and doves of the cities.**

Pigeons are now considered to be an invasive species in the US – except for a few breeds of native pigeons. Doves are regulated in most states, but Feral pigeons generally are not. This means that keeping pigeons is far less regulated than the keeping of gamebirds or migratory birds. **They are, in many ways, the “forgotten livestock”.**

Pigeons were considered to be of value, and encouraged in cities of old. **They were kept as meat birds (only for royalty in some countries), eggs were gathered and enjoyed as a delicacy, and they were valued for their droppings, which were used for fertilizer, and for making gunpowder at one time (really), so much so that guards were posted by dovecotes to keep the droppings from being stolen.** Feathers were also collected from pigeons, and pigeon down was used to stuff pillows and beds (mites were not a problem in previous centuries, they would naturally freeze out). **They've been considered a valuable meat source in hard times**, because they are so willing to take care of so many of their own needs, requiring lower amounts of input from the farmer than most table birds.

We now consider them to often be nuisance birds – they scavenge where we do not want them, leave droppings in inconvenient locations, and are voracious eaters of newly sown grass seed and garden seed. **Pigeons are not welcome in the modern world of disconnection between nature and life.** When birds are part of the routine of daily life, and not just something extraneous, we appreciate their productivity, hardiness, survival ability in difficult surroundings, and yes, even their waste products – manure is a valuable commodity in any properly run farm, and it is **only industrial Neanderthals who consider animal waste to be a smelly nuisance** (and pigeon droppings don't smell anyway, unless the pigeon is sick!). **Pigeons are very useful birds – when one lives a life that permits their usage.** Isolated from nature and self-sufficiency, pigeons become a thing to be denigrated and disparaged.

They may still intrude where you do not want them, but they are part of the give and take of nature when you farm or garden to any degree. They'll sneak into your back yard and feed with your chickens if you scatter scratch grain for the chickens, and they'll hop around the bushes snacking on berries and fallen fruit in the summer and fall.

If you search online for information on pigeons in any given state, much of the information you find will be in regards to exterminating them. People disparage them, calling them flying rats. They talk about all the diseases they “might” be carrying, and often only mention in small print somewhere that pigeons have not been the vector in known epidemics (disease comes in some other way).

Their gurgling “Coo” can be heard often through the winter months in colder climates, especially if your yard or farm provides one of those favored food sources in winter time. Less obnoxious than squirrels, and less aggressive about scavenging, also.

They'll eat almost anything – garden produce, grass seed heads, table scraps of quite a wide variety, dried seeds, legumes, and all manner of grains, nuts, berries, and even some insects. They live in the no-man's land somewhere between herbivore and omnivore, and the tendency toward one direction or the other depends upon the breed, sort of like geese.

Pigeons are easier to tame than chickens, and are generally a more sociable animal. While chickens are often disliked on the farm (useful, but smelly and not friendly), pigeons, once brought under the care of the farmer, are more generally enjoyed.

This ubiquitous bird is also a bellweather of sorts in regards to environmental health. Because they are everywhere, and eat food from all kinds of places, their overall health can be a strong indicator of the balance of air quality, water quality, and natural food sources. In rural areas, their health declines in the presence of agricultural chemicals. In the city, their health declines when pollution is a problem. While they may get fat on increases in food waste in the city, that isn't the same thing as being healthy – if the food is poor quality, the health of the birds declines, and they are more likely to harbor parasites, pests, and illnesses. **When pigeons harbor disease (and the reputation for doing so is largely undeserved), it is more of an indicator of the way people are living, than of any predisposition of the species toward carrying illnesses.**

Pigeons raised for meat are referred to as “Utility” breeds, as opposed to “Sport”, “Fancy”, or “Show” breeds. That gets kind of confusing, because there are also Utility Show breeds, which have often lost many of the productivity characteristics so vital for true meat production. Utility birds which have been bred for meat production are generally a better option for producing meat than utility birds that come from show bird lines, which may have lost vital parenting instincts – as with all creatures, if you focus too much on Pretty you seem to lose a few essential brain cells in the process.

Pigeons as a whole are fairly smart. They can recognize their own reflection in a mirror, and is one of only 6 species, and the only non-mammal, that has this ability. They can see colors, including ultraviolet, and they can recognize faces, and people and objects in photographs.

Our focus here is on Utility Pigeons – that means pigeons that will be butchered for meat. If you can't handle the thought of anyone killing a pigeon to eat it, then this isn't the information you want. Pigeons as a food source are valuable, and they can be raised in areas where many other kinds of poultry cannot. This makes them especially relevant to our day, and to the rapidly growing masses of urban farmers who need food sources that fit in a backyard and that are allowed by Cities and HOAs.

Pigeons for training dogs, or for hunting release are not discussed. Our focus is on meat and egg production for sustainable living. Hunting has a place in that, but it is a different place, not covered here.

The raising of pigeons for meat by individuals has declined dramatically. Currently there is a slow increase in the number of large scale pigeon farms for raising squabs, but pigeons on the family farm have largely disappeared. Along with that, **the diversity in Utility Pigeon breeds has been minimized, and many are now on the verge of extinction.** Saving them is possible, and will likely happen naturally as backyard farmers realize the value of pigeons in their home economy.

We hope to be part of saving those declining breeds, and bringing pigeon back to the freezer of the average home farmer.



The Great Depression

During the Great Depression, there were families who depended upon Pigeons to survive. Indeed, Pigeons made the vital difference for them, in allowing them to get through what otherwise would have been desperate times.

Families would keep pigeons in a loft, a barn, or a dovecote in the yard. Most of the pigeons were wild pigeons, which are easily trapped, or which will voluntarily come in to roost if favorable conditions are provided.

The pigeons were free to roam, scavenging food from surrounding crops, fields, hedges, and cities.

Pigeons are great flyers, so they can cover many miles in a day, traveling long distances to gather food. Given a nice place to nest, pigeons will take care of themselves, so they allowed people to harvest a cheaply raised food.

The pigeon keepers would raid the nests periodically for eggs, and for squabs (young pigeons) that were ready to butcher. The squabs would be dressed out and sold to restaurants, or used to feed the family. Eggs were also used, or sold. Pigeon droppings make great fertilizer, which was used to enhance the vegetable gardens.

During seasons of scarce natural forage the families fed the pigeons on table scraps and garden scraps. This was sufficient combined with what the pigeons could forage on their own. In this respect, much like free-range chickens, only free-range Pigeons cover a larger distance because they fly fast and far.

This example is often used as a challenge to contemporary farmer wannabes. They hold it up as proof that pigeons are cheap to keep. While there is truth in this, there is also fallacy.

We do not live in the same world that existed during World War I (at which time the Government recommended this method of keeping pigeons), or during the Great Depression. Our laws are more repressive, our neighbors less used to nature up close and personal and more objecting to pigeon droppings, and the natural forage options for pigeons are less acceptable (being contaminated by chemicals in so many ways, whether in the city or in the countryside).

Pigeons are also seen as more of a nuisance, and more subject to extermination if let run wild. This isn't a real problem if you are keeping pigeons that were originally feral pigeons, because the hole that one leaves in your dovecote will rapidly be filled by another. But **an evolution of pigeons has taken place also. The pigeons raised for meat now, are not the pigeons raised for meat in the Depression.**

Squabs are bigger now, and expected to be bigger if you want to sell them. If you do not mind the smaller ones, this is not an issue. But **we have the option of specially bred Utility Pigeons, which are bred to produce squabs that are considerably larger than wild pigeons produce.** The breeding stock is also immensely more expensive! So much so that you would not want to risk them being shot down or poisoned by irritated neighbors, or caught by a hungry falcon on the way home.

So the methods of rearing have changed, and the cost equations have changed along with it. What our forbears did in the Great Depression, we simply cannot practically do today.

Pigeons still have a valued place on a well run farm. They provide tender easily digestible meat (including excellent livers), healthy eggs, feathers for pillows (they do require simple non-chemical treating), droppings for unsurpassed high nitrogen fertilizer, and the byproducts of butchering can be fed to omnivores (dogs, pigs, and even worms or BSF larvae). They can be fed on a range of farming byproducts and minimally processed crops (I'm not suggesting feeding them on garbage, just things like garden scraps, plants gone to seed, etc).

You can't do it like they did, but it is possible to find a new way, right on your farm, JUST for your farm, to raise pigeons in a profitable or cost effective way, to lower grocery prices or even provide income.



Profit from Pigeons

Raising pigeons for meat and eggs and byproducts for your own use is an entirely different thing than raising Pigeons for profit. The equations are different, regulatory issues are different, and so are the mechanics of the whole thing.

We figured we'd get this issue out of the way right off the bat. I mean, I'm one of those people that any time I figure out how to do something new, one of the first things I do is assess the business potential. I not only want to know how feasible it is for me to do it, but I want to know if there is a market for it, and what the realistic profit margins might be, so I do the research and figure it out. If I end up deciding not to do it, well, at some point, one of my clients is gonna wanna know anyway, so nothing is lost! By giving you this information first, you can then read the other chapters with the right background in place.

First, to make a profit, you have to get your cost of raising flocks as low as practical, without compromising on quality. You also need sufficient volume to make it worth your while – probably a **minimum of a dozen pairs.** You don't need thousands – in fact, larger numbers may get in your way because of regulatory issues involving larger numbers.

You also have to check the regulations involving what you want to do. There are regulations usually at the Federal, State, and Local levels. In general, if you are not selling across state lines, or if you have flocks below 3000 hens, you are not bound by Federal laws, but this is changing, so check before you proceed.

Many states have exceptions to regulations in certain circumstances. They tend to involve selling direct from the farm, sometimes selling at Farmer's Markets or on delivery routes. They usually do not protect you when selling items out of state.

Regulations are more likely to involve the sale of food, rather than the sale of live animals, and there are three levels of regulations there. **Live animals tend to be the least regulated. Foods that you grow which are not repackaged or handled intensively are semi-regulated – eggs, produce, etc. Foods that you actively handle – butchered meats, baked goods or dried foods – are most intensively regulated and will have to meet food safety and food handling requirements at many levels of government in most cases.** Again, some states do have exemptions for small farmers selling direct from the farm.

We really do recommend selling direct from your farm, to local markets, when possible. Most people who sell frozen squab find that they cannot keep up with the demand, even when buyers must come to their farm to get it. Selling breeding stock and live birds this way can also be lucrative if you are in an area where there is good demand.

If you sell to restaurants, you'll have to produce large squab that meet a minimum size requirement. If you sell to individuals, they may like a larger squab, but they'll accept smaller ones if you can only afford breeding stock for smaller breeds. This is important to know before you set up shop and decide to reach a certain market – know what they will require, and what kind of breeding stock you'll need for that. If you have to get in the door with Feral pigeons, then you can sell them as "Heritage Squabs", the smaller Pigeon eaten by our ancestors. It'll sell!

Eggs can also be sold direct from the farm, or at Farmer's Markets. You may also find local stores that can carry them – this is legal in some states, not in others. Pigeon eggs are such a specialty commodity, chances are that those who really want them will come to you to get them.

There is a good market for breeding stock of rare breed farm animals. I think the potentials are there in this economic climate to increase demand for Utility Pigeon breeding stock – it is a slow process and

too soon for us to tell yet, though we are seeing a lot of online inquiries for Utility breeding stock.

You can sell live squabs so people can take their own to the butcher, or you can find a butcher who may want to acquire them from you as needed. The demand for live squabs is less than for dressed squabs, and may be more or less than for breeding stock, depending on your location.

There is a limited market for feathers, if you have treated them properly to eliminate mites. There are limited markets for them, either wholesale or direct to the customers, but you'll want to state that you have treated them for mites.

Manure has markets as well, Pigeon manure sells for about twice what other manures sell for.

The last potential market, is the animal feed market. You can package and freeze the parts that are leftover from butchering. Now... most people are going to be grossed out by entrails! But if you pull out just the breasts on the birds, the rest of the bird (sans entrails) makes good dogfood and cat food for raw feeders. Really all people do not want to feed their animals, is the actual intestines (not because it is not healthy, just because it is gross!). They don't mind livers, hearts, gizzards, lungs, etc. Frozen raw dogfood and catfood sells well now though, and this is a potential market if you are doing a lot of butchering. It can be used as feed for another cash product if you want as well, to feed other animals that you sell, such as pigs.

You may have been warned not to give poultry bones to your animals. That applies to cooked poultry bones. They splinter and can cause problems. But fresh uncooked bones are not a problem – cats and wild dogs, after all, eat birds all the time.

Now, there's a concept here that I hope you can grasp. Because if you do, it is the difference between success and failure from a financial perspective.

You CANNOT compete with the big companies on their terms. If you do, then you'll fail. And nobody will ever even hear the splash when you sink. Pay attention here, because this is THE SECRET to making small farming pay!

Big farms sell to packing houses who sell to distributors who sell to supermarkets for nationwide distribution. They sell something for \$2 and it costs \$10 in the store. They have to produce huge volumes to make any money at all, and they have to buy in bulk to afford to do it, and cut production costs to the bone by mechanizing animal production (a bad idea anyway).

If you sell direct to the customer, you can avoid all that, and all the loss of profit that happens between you and the customer, and you can get \$10 or more for the same product. If yours is better, you can charge a little more, and people will pay it for fresh, uncontaminated food (chemicals, that is). Not an exorbitant amount more, but the usual difference between standard and organic foods, even if you are not certified organic. **As long as you can honestly assure your customers that you feed your animals a natural diet and provide humane conditions, they'll pay a little more for the good stuff, and you'll get RETAIL price for it, not wholesale price for it.**

The local money is in clean, healthy food, that has NOT been fed commercial feed mixes loaded with medications and antibiotics.

You have to do all the marketing. That takes time, or you have to pay some for it. But you keep more of the profits this way. THIS is the thing that makes small farms financially sustainable.

Become part of the Locavore movement, and you have a chance to profit well. Try to compete with the big companies on their terms, and it won't be worth it. This is how you make money at it. You go find your own customers, and you charge them retail price, not wholesale rock bottom prices.

Those are the prices you base your financial calculations upon when determining whether you can afford to do this or not.

I've assessed the potentials, and like all farm animals, the potentials are good IF you promote well, manage smart, and approach it with a realistic expectation of very hard work that eventually pays off very well.

Keep it simple, start small, and start with the least regulatory burden that you can. You really can profit from the sale of farm products from your farm, and Pigeons have a good potential to be a profitable niche, if you plan and manage smart.



Pigeon Space

Pigeons can theoretically be raised in “small spaces”, but that may not mean what you think it means.

Some sources say they take less space than chickens, and that is only partially true. There are many ways to raise pigeons, and some of the ways that they were traditionally raised just don't work well in the world we live in.

We'll cover the options in more detail later, but you'll need to figure on space enough to raise your pigeons through their life cycle, right on your own property. Anything else at this stage is just too risky, for a number of reasons.

You can raise about 32 pair in a 10X10 space, with nest boxes around the walls (perches and feeders need to fit as well). You'll need another 10X10 space if you want to give them the ability to have some flight room. They'll be healthier if you do.

This is now considered a fairly normal way to raise pigeons. It is not by any means the only way, and you can do it with less space – in which circumstance you will compromise on numbers of pairs you can accommodate, space they have to move around, or other elements.

You can also do it with much more space. Doing so allows more pairs, or more comfort and natural life for the pairs that you raise.

Pigeons are social animals, they like to be in flocks. In the wild, they'll often group in very large flocks. Breeders seem to think that around 30 pairs is a manageable number, but historically doves often housed thousands of pairs.

The simplest and cheapest way to raise pigeons is to have a small dovecote on a pole in your yard, or fastened to the wall – and this is how many people have done it through many eras. A ladder is used to inspect, manage, and harvest while the pigeons are out foraging in the daytime. The huge drawback to this in a contemporary setting is that your pigeons are feeding on the property of other people. This means they are eating what they can scavenge from others. While this means you pay less for feed, it means you do not choose what they eat. Other people do.

If you live near a city, they'll fly into the city to forage. **Pigeons fly long distances, very fast. They'll fly miles for an easy meal.** Just because you are twenty miles away from town does not mean they are not out scrounging fast food and dumpster meals. **They may be taken to be feral birds in town.** It also means they may be foraging on farm crops that have been sprayed with pesticides and herbicides, or they may be finding the poison that irritated neighbors have placed out for them. If you have fields of your own grain for them to feed upon, this might be reasonable. Otherwise, the risks are pretty high.

This is why the Depression Era “raise them for practically nothing” mentality does not work anymore. The wide open fields of good forage just aren't there now.

Choose your raising methods wisely, and choose the space that you allow your pigeons carefully, because it dictates to a large extent the kind of raising methods that you CAN practice. There isn't one single way that is best – it all depends upon your circumstances, and your production goals.

Pigeons do fit on a balcony, on a porch, or in a back yard, if you raise them in a cage. They require compromise to do this now, but it can be done if necessary. We'll cover ways to cut the costs of raising them in other sections, along with details about different housing options. For now, realize that there are trade-offs in every raising method and housing choice, and that times have changed. What was done in the Depression, or World War I just isn't duplicatable now.



Utility Breeds

Utility Pigeon breeds are those which have been specially bred to produce large squabs, very quickly, on a reasonable amount of feed, and which have been bred for good parenting and productivity. Good Utility Pigeons can produce high amounts of good meat, very quickly, and reliably.

They are significantly larger than feral pigeons, though they originate pretty much from the same stock. **There are many Utility breeds, but it is now pretty hard to find pure Utility pigeons in most of the breeds. Many of them have been subverted by show breeding, destroying their functional qualities.**

Two breeds are still fairly available as pure Utility breeds, though you still have to ensure that you are getting Utility stock, not Show stock:

- Kings – The most common and popular Utility Pigeon breed.
- Carneau – Also more available than other Utility breeds, except Kings.

There are other breeds that are either known Utility breeds, or which have been used as Utility breeds for squab production at one time or another. Remaining Utility characteristics in these breeds varies widely, depending on the specific breed, and the specific line from which you obtain birds:

- Mondains (French and Swiss)
- Texas Whites
- Texas Pioneer – An auto-sexing breed
- American Giant Runts
- Hungarians (may need help with raising young) – a Bantam Chicken sized bird.
- American Giant Homers
- Strasser
- Hubbles

I may get some flack over some of those in the last category – I'm going on what I have found mentioned by multiple sources.

I expect I'll get even more flack over this next category. There are other Pigeons which have been used for meat either historically, or for side production of squabs in conjunction with breeding for other purposes. Some of these were used as original breed stock for some of the Utility pigeon breeds. Some of them are undoubtedly not available in the US, but others may be. Most are smaller than specially bred Utility pigeons, but produce good edible meat, if not as much at one time.

- Band Tailed Pigeon – Wild Pigeon in the US, may be regulated in some areas.
- Carrier Pigeon – Fairly skinny, but was used for meat as a sideline to production of carrier pigeons.
- Lahore – colorful, classed as a Fancy pigeon, a little larger than medium sized.
- Modena – Foundation stock for some Utility breeds.
- Rock Pigeons - The common feral pigeon
- Dragoon Homer – has similar color to the Rock Dove, but a heavier body, medium size pigeon.
- Maltese – fairly tall and very upright, not good breeders due to their exaggerated shape.
- Banat Chicken Pigeon (has a different native name)
- Helmet Pigeon – considered a Fancy breed, medium sized bird.
- Altenburger Trumpeter (for culling squabs)
- Old German Owl – medium sized bird, generally requiring foster hens.

- Capuchine
- Florentine
- Nuns – medium sized birds.
- Saxon Breast, Saxon Monk, Saxon Priest Pigeons – medium sized birds.

If you decide to use anything other than a pure Utility breed, you'll need to be cautious. **Many Pigeon breeders get really bent over the issue of actually eating Pigeon.** They won't like that you are contemplating breeding Pigeons they provide, for table meat.

Some breeds that have suitable size and shape for squabs don't breed well. Either they are not terribly fertile, or they crush eggs, do not incubate well, or will fail to feed their babies. Foster parents can address this issue, though it is less efficient. Further, fertility issues may be addressed through diet – with many birds, fertility declines in captivity due to insufficient vitamin A, E, or due to insufficient amounts of easily digestible proteins. **If you are breeding a non-utility pigeon anyway, the culls may be used for meat, though most of them will be older birds, fit only for the stew pot.**

Basically, any of the larger Pigeon breeds with a full breast is suitable for squab if you are not selling them wholesale to restaurants which require a certain minimum size. All of them originated from the same root breed.

You can even eat the diminutive fancy breeds, and strictly show breeds. But many do not breed well, are far less productive, and they'll cost you more to produce. Plus you'll encounter such outrage at the mention of it that it really isn't worth it, since there are birds that are just much better for the production of meat.

Utility breeds are the best ones to aim for if you can afford it, because they'll produce maximum meat for the money. They are no longer cheap though – quite costly in fact. Good breeding stock is bordering on outrageous, and much of it has to do with the subversion of the Utility breeds to show breeds.

Show breeds tend to have more trouble with breeding than pure utility breeds. They are not as consistent at laying, less likely to sit their eggs well, and many make poor parents if they do hatch the eggs. This tends to be true of racing birds and flyers as well, they just do not have the high productivity of either feral pigeons or Utility birds, plus they are far smaller in size.

Show breeds also lack hardiness, and disease resistance, and tend to be more fussy about diet. Turning working animals into show toys will invariably destroy any functional utility in any animal – we have seen this with chickens, dogs, geese, and other animals. They become nothing more than a shiny ornament to hang about the neck of a wealthy patron.

Lacking the availability of a Utility breed, you are probably better off just acquiring some feral pigeons and working with them. They are highly productive already, and the survival instinct and genetics have not been bred out of them. While they are smaller, they are thrifty and were the same bird that was raised for thousands of years to feed people around the world.

Your goal is, after all, to either get food on the table, or to develop a product that you can sell. Good quality birds are essential for that – but that doesn't necessarily mean birds with ribbons hanging off them. If you can find true Utility birds and afford them, get them. Otherwise get what you can afford, and get started. The sooner you do, the sooner you can save enough to get better breeding stock if that is what you desire.

Start with three or more pairs, and you can improve your own breed from there if you desire to do so. **Once you have Pigeons, you have possibilities.**



Breeding Pigeons

Pigeons mate for life, as long as something does not interrupt that process. This means that their accommodations require at least one nest box per pair. Intensive rearing operations use two nest boxes per pair – allowing the pair to lay and incubate eggs in one nest while still finishing rearing an earlier set of squabs in the first nest. They can produce young almost twice as fast this way.

Pigeons are fairly long lived. You read over and over that their useful breeding life is about 5-6 years, but in fact they can go on breeding for much longer than that, but their productivity will gradually decline. Feeding them well and giving them good natural care can extend that considerably and preserve fertility for a longer period of time. Pigeons can live well into their teen years.

Pigeons will generally lay two eggs, approximately two days apart. If the eggs are removed, they'll continue to lay. Normally though, they will lay two eggs and commence to incubate them for 16-19 days, at which time the chicks will hatch.

The chicks grow very fast. Both parents will feed them with regurgitated "pigeon milk" which is just food that is suited to the growth stage of the young. It changes and becomes coarser as the baby pigeons age. Pigeons are very capable of raising two chicks to either table size, or to fledging.

The babies are feathered at about 18 days of age, at which time they can be slaughtered for squab. You can let them go just a bit longer if you want, and they will get bigger, but they'll also get a teeny bit tougher by the day. Once they have fledged, they are really only good for stew. Older pigeons may also be butchered for stewing, but that's about it. One squab purchaser says they can tell whether the pigeons are older than they are supposed to be – they simply open the cages, and if any of them fly out, they are too old!

This rapid cycle means it takes just a little over a month to progress from egg to dinner. Good breeders will produce between 12 and 16 squabs per year, with typical slowdowns in breeding in the heat of summer, and sometimes in the deepest cold of the winter. One squab makes a nice dinner serving for one person, so it is easy to calculate how many meals you will get from them.

Some breeders deliberately separate their pairs during the hottest months. Part of this is because the heat stresses the birds in hot areas, and part of it is traditional theories that young produced from sowing time (when grain and seed sources were the lowest) to about August (when crops had enough forage for Pigeons), were poor squabs, and feeding the birds at that time was too costly. Pigeons will naturally stop breeding when food is scarce, so they take a break during stressful times in the wild. If you provide good feed, and good air circulation, your birds may or may not breed well year-round, largely depending on your climate.

Pigeons can be paired up deliberately (for selective breeding), or they can be randomly paired (they'll do the selecting themselves) in a colony setting. Both methods work for different goals. Typically, if you do the pairing, you'll need to isolate the pair until you see successful mating taking place, or until eggs appear in their nest (if you are not around when they get frisky).

The kind of breeding you wish to do will affect the kind of housing you choose. Selective breeding is much easier if you have housing that naturally facilitates this. Colony breeding does not require any special adaptations, classical pigeon housing facilitates it nicely.

Pigeon breeding is where the term "billing and cooing" comes from. It sounds a bit better than "flapping and falling" which also happens. Female pigeons are coy, they like to be wooed, and male pigeons are show-offs. Sort of like teenagers.

Pigeon cocks can also be aggressive with other males, and they will compete over females. This

CAN result in injuries, but generally will not. Sometimes you may need to isolate a bird, so do have some kind of plan in mind for that – a good sized transport cage can do in a pinch.

Both cocks and hens are territorial. Their nest, and their front porch is THEIRS. They'll defend it.

This also means that if you practice colony rearing, there will sometimes be some combat over the best nesting sites. This is normal pigeon behavior.

Differentiating hens from cocks is difficult, and is not done before the birds reach maturity. At that time, size and behavioral differences become evident in many cases, or can be provoked by placing the bird next to a bird of known gender. **Some differences are breed dependent.**

There are one or two breeds that are auto-sexing. The Texan pigeons are the most common breed with this characteristic. Males are lighter colored than the females, from a very young age, making it easy to determine gender.

This means that if you are purchasing pigeons you will either be purchasing straight run young pigeons, or best guess older pigeons if they are not already paired up. (Unless you are purchasing auto-sexing pigeons.)

Gender determination is one of the reasons why many people practice colony rearing, letting the birds take care of choosing a mate. This is much simpler, especially for those just starting out raising pigeons.

If pigeons are mated, and let loose to fly each day, they'll return to their nests. Once they establish a territory, they generally stick to it.

Younger pigeons which are not mated yet do not have strong ties to home and hearth. If they meet up with a pleasing member of the opposite sex while out on a forage run, they'll romp off with them, never to return.

In the older dovecotes, no one ever worried about that, because wild pigeons would usually come in and fill the nests anyway, so the loss of any of the young birds that outgrew the dinner plate before they could be harvested were not missed if they did abandon the fort.

If you've spent \$50 to \$250 per bird for good breeding stock, losing the next generation is not a risk you are going to want to take in most circumstances. Breeders of racing birds have to take those chances. But breeders of meat birds tend to not want to take risks with losing the birds. Keeping the costs down is hard enough, and the price of the bird may be higher than the price of the feed you'd save by letting them roam. Loss of potential breeding stock is no small loss.

Good meat bird breeding stock is costly, and you want to select true utility breeds which are still being bred for meat production, NOT show breeds, or show utility breeds. Once someone starts showing birds, all practicality seems to go right out the window.

The real aim of this section though, is to help you determine some goals. Do you want to breed to improve the line, or do you want to just breed meat birds and sometimes cull pairs that don't produce well? The answer to that question plays largely upon the next sections, and determines to a large degree how you will raise your pigeons, and how you will house and keep them.



Housing and Keeping

Pigeons are not chickens. While they require some of the same conditions, and you CAN use a chicken coop for pigeons, they require something between waterfowl and chicken conditions.

Housing needs to provide a nest for each pair – two nests for each pair if you are practicing intensive production. Nests are about the same size as chicken nests (about 10-12 inches wide, by about 14-18 inches deep). Nests can have a variety of designs – a box with a bowl – or two bowls, is the simplest (bowls the size of large dog bowls). Nest boxes built onto the wall are fairly traditional, and can be built in pairs, with full walls between sets, and half walls between the two nests for a pair. People have used all manner of nest designs, including chicken nest styles, 5 gallon buckets, milk crates, and even shelves with bowls on them. If nests are built onto the wall, they need a landing platform, which is recommended to be fairly wide if you also want to provide mating space for the birds (historic dovecotes did not have that feature).

You'll find all kinds of recommended nesting parameters for Pigeons. The bottom line with this though, is that pigeons are not picky. A large enough spot for two birds to build a nest and care for their young is all that is required. Partitions between nesting pairs increase production and reduce fights. All the rest is really just convenience for the birds, and not absolutely necessary. Use what you can easily obtain, or what you can build without injuring yourself!

Pigeon housing should provide feeding stations – either individual feeding dishes, or communal feeding containers (unless you have a flight pen where you scatter and hang feed). Feed containers need to be covered enough that the birds can get their heads in, but so they cannot climb over them, or they'll mess them up. You can either mix feed and put it in a single container, or you can use a container for each kind of grain or supplement, and let them feed, cafeteria style.

Feeding stations should also provide access to oyster shell (or crushed eggshell), and grit. Most breeders also recommend mineral supplements, though this need may also be met by providing them with fresh or dried greens on a regular basis.

Pigeons require access to fresh clean water at all times, especially when raising squabs – which takes a lot of water for the parents. Water dishes should also be set up so the birds cannot get into them. **Pigeons SIP water, they do not scoop and tip like most birds.** This means that they need water provided in a container that allows them to immerse their beaks. Nipple watering systems are not suitable for pigeons.

Pigeons also do best with water for bathing. Many breeders fill a bathing pan and bring it in once a day for this, so that the pigeons do not mess up the water, since they'll also drink from it. Fountains, birdbaths, and ornamental dishes are entirely appropriate for this, as long as the water is cleaned daily. Larger containers would require less frequent cleaning, but will also be more difficult to drain and clean. Pigeons kept in individual cage style coops can thrive without specific bathing water – they will use their drinking water if they have sufficient access.

Sunlight and fresh air will improve the health of your pigeons. Sunlight can be provided through windows, and dappled shade is acceptable, but the best option is a flight pen which gets sun, and housing which provides shade.

Ventilation in the housing, helps the birds to stay healthier, and makes it healthier for you to work inside as well. Drafts should be blocked from the nests in the winter. Some experts recommend lofts and coops with open window or wall ventilation, but this probably would not be wise in northern climates or at high altitude, especially where there are high winds. Up there, a little air vent goes a long way!

The health of pigeons is typically assessed by the appearance of the birds, and the appearance and

smell of their environment. Feather sheen, color, and appearance are all indicators of health. A healthy pigeon looks good. Pigeons may lose their sheen if they are having health problems. Their feathers may look damaged if they are infested with lice, mites, or parasites.

Healthy pigeons also drop small feathers regularly, and will generally have some evident on their droppings. Absence of these dropping feathers is an indicator of health or nutritional problems.

Droppings normally do NOT smell. A healthy Pigeon coop will not smell like a chicken coop. It will not smell foul (or fowl?). Strong odors are an indicator that something is wrong. This is one reason why keeping pigeons in large dovecotes (which were only cleaned to remove valuable droppings for use as fertilizer or for saltpeter) was possible. That many chickens in that small a space would not be endurable for the time it takes to harvest squabs or eggs!

Pigeons have strong parenting instincts. Since both parents will incubate eggs and care for young, some breeders will pair up extra males or females – putting two males or two females in a confined space with eggs from a valued breeding pair, to produce more young, either for squabs, or for raising additional breeding stock. Many times, these mismatched pairs will successfully incubate eggs and rear young. Males can be aggressive enough to harm another male though, so there are risks to attempting this, and not every pairing like that will work. It is just an option if you are short on foster parents.

Housing (including flight pens) can be maintained on bare floors, with deep litter (either pine or straw), or on dirt. Each option has pros and cons, and you really just have to pick the set of problems you think you can deal with.

Raising on bare floors (with nesting materials provided in a hopper) requires that you clean from a bare floor, and it gives the pigeons the least natural surface outside of the nest.

Deep litter requires that you put in a fairly thick layer of litter – either straw or wood shavings – to which additional layers are added periodically. The entire litter base is replaced every six months or year (depending a lot on your climate – hot climates require more frequent replacement since things compost faster). There are some risks with this. In a hot climate, there is a very real risk of **spontaneous combustion** if water is spilled, or if other moisture gets in, due to the heat created from high nitrogen composting.

There is also a risk over long term, if the litter is over dirt, of a buildup of serious fungal or bacterial disease (some of which are contagious to people, though only really dangerous to those with immune compromise) which is fostered by a high nitrogen soil over a period of several years. The use of pine bedding will reduce that potential (and pigeons are less sensitive to pine than other poultry). Minimum of yearly complete cleanout would almost eliminate that risk, especially if your bottom layers are thick, and there is not a high amount of moisture.

Pigeons thrive on dirt, but there is a greater risk of fungal and bacterial build-up if you do not take precautions to prevent it. This does not really become a risk except when soil has a very high nitrogen content, created by long term accumulation of droppings that are not removed or absorbed by plants.

Pigeons are no more likely to harbor these diseases than chickens, and in this instance, carry exactly the same risks. Pigeons are simply more vilified than chickens as “carriers of disease”. Regularly raking out droppings, or removal of a layer of soil, and replacing with new soil, will help to reduce the risks. **That soil makes a valuable addition to your compost, where the nitrogen is diluted to an appropriate level to nourish plants.**

Pigeon housing should be cleaned using some precautions against lung conditions which may affect some individuals. Cleaning the coops presents the greatest risk for inhaling unhealthy particulates, because it stirs up so much into the air at once. Some sources recommend hosing the bedding down before you remove it, to minimize airborne particles. Some recommend wearing a HEPA mask.

Designing your housing so that you can tend pigeons and nests from outside, without having to walk around on the litter, may also minimize the risks of lung conditions or allergic reactions.

Again, this is no more risky than working with chickens, and outside access nest boxes have been preferred by chicken wranglers for many decades.

Many sources will tell you that it is imperative to keep rodents out of the Pigeon housing. Honestly, that just isn't going to happen! Keep the birds healthy, and keep any rodent droppings cleaned up. Mice are going to get in pretty much no matter how hard you try to keep them out.

You can design them to keep out predators though, which means making sure there are no holes large enough to let in cats, weasels, or rats, and making sure latches and openings are coon-proof. Windows should be openable for air (or just left open to the air), but enclosed with hardware cloth. There really isn't much that can get through a well fastened sturdy gauge hardware cloth.

Flight pens really are best on dirt. Some people put down gravel, and landscape the inside like a park. While this looks really good immediately after it is done, Pigeons will poop outside. Dust will blow in, and gather on your rocks, and within two or three years you'll have to take out all the rock and replace it if you don't want well-fertilized weeds growing in the rocks.

if you leave it on dirt, you have the added advantage of being able to plant growing frames (screened frames to grow forage foods), and of being able to scatter scratch grains for the birds. Don't worry about scattering grain where they are walking and messing things up. They will forage there anyway, you might as well give them something worth going after. Pigeons do eat some of their own dung (as do many animals), which has been shown to be a major factor in providing probiotics and in strengthening their resistance to some types of illnesses, as well as increasing their levels of B-12. We prefer to do most of our feeding on the ground, instead of in feeders, since that is how birds typically feed anyway. Just scatter things around well enough that they all have a chance at it, and keep things raked enough that they are not foraging on a solid mass of droppings – soil, with scattered droppings is not a problem.

Flight pens built on dirt though, will have some of the same risks of fungal or bacterial build-up as housing has. You can use raking as a means of controlling this risk if you wish. **The best way to neutralize this risk is actually with plants.** Plants not only consume the excess nitrogen, they create a more natural environment where microbes that eat dangerous fungi and bacteria and keep them under control, are encouraged to thrive. **Nature often has a way of taking care of risks when we just return to a more natural way of doing things.**

This is harder to keep going than raking though, because if the Pigeons are in a very high load in the flight pen, they'll end up scratching down to dirt fairly rapidly. We see the same problems with chickens confined to a run. **Larger pens are one solution, but growing frames may be another solution to get plants into the ground and keep them there.**

A growing frame is simply a frame made of 2X4s or 4X6s turned on edge, with hardware cloth covering the side. An area is planted with a variety of grass, weed, clover, bean, alfalfa, lettuce, or other seeds. The Frame is then laid over it, with the hardware cloth side UP. This gives the plants a few inches of space in which to grow before they are reachable by the poultry. The Pigeons can eat off the tops, but can't eat them to the ground. You can keep two or three going at a time, in different stages of growth, to keep the soil healthy, and to keep the Pigeons happily feeding on fresh greens.

Flight pens may be the primary feeding area for pigeons in a well-managed setup. Fencing or perches can be used to hang forage feed for the birds. Vegetables, limbs with berries on them, millet stems, etc. Hang them in several locations if you have a lot of birds – letting 20 birds fight over one apple is NOT a good thing!

If you let your pigeons fly, you'll have some additional concerns with housing. You'll need an access

port (called a “trap”), where they can come back in, but where predators can NOT enter. There are many ways to do this, mostly having to do with properly sizing the entrance, and blocking it at night so that predators may not enter.

Pigeons on the loose will also mess up roofs. If you have **water catchment systems** that collect rainwater, you'll either want to avoid letting your pigeons loose, or you'll want to put some kind of barriers on the roofs to keep them from perching (and pooping) there.

Housing and keeping your pigeons can be simplified in a number of ways, by working with the way Pigeons live life in the wild anyway. You aren't providing them with a high-rise penthouse. You are providing them with an alternative to a hole in a cliff. Once you realize that all they want is someplace that is dry, reasonably free of drafts, and where they can get water and a good meal when they want it, the whole prospect becomes much simpler!



Feed and Nutrition

The diet of the Pigeon is more complicated to determine than you might think... after all, don't they eat almost everything?

While breeders of sporting birds and show birds wax poetic upon the topic of grains, legumes, minerals, supplements and feeding schedules, there really isn't a lot of information available on what pigeons really do EAT in the wild! Pigeon experts pretty much tell you to feed them a mix of grains and legumes, and to give them mineral supplements.

Pigeons don't eat like that in the wild, and feral pigeons vary widely from those recommendations. While they do get the bulk of their nutrition from grains and legumes, they eat a wide variety of other foods as well – eliminating the need for mineral supplements. This is not difficult to duplicate in a home farm setting, provided you have a garden, or eat a lot of produce. You can treat your pigeons much like your chickens – feed them grains, but also toss them fruit and vegetable scraps, and good quality table scraps.

Pigeons can eat commercial poultry feeds, and they can eat other animal feeds as well, but that is not a favorite option of mine. For one, it increases the cost. It also increases the amount of chemical exposure, due to the way in which most animal feeds are produced. Organic feeds are often still very low quality (containing too many refined ingredients), and are very costly.

My favorite option has always been to feed our animals FOOD. To grow as much as we can ourselves, to use kitchen and garden scraps for them, and to produce natural protein sources ourselves. We buy what we absolutely cannot provide ourselves.

Most meat birds are fed “free choice”. That means that food is put out, and they are able to eat all they want, of whichever items they want. This approach does more closely mimic the way Pigeons feed in the wild, since they gather foods from a variety of sources, and have the freedom to select according to their need. Most animals will seek out foods that they need when they are deficient in various nutrients (people do that too, but we are not attuned enough to our bodies to pay attention to what it really wants). This really works best when you vary their diet from day to day. **The greater the variety of foods, the better they'll do, and the less they will eat overall.**

Some Pigeon keepers measure the feed per bird, by weight. This might help with racing pigeons, but is not a good idea with meat birds. Let them choose what they need. If you feed them right, they won't overeat. Animals simply do not when they are fed a healthy diet (we have fat cats and fat dogs because catfood and dogfood are NOT healthy diets for those animals).

Pigeons in the wild get minerals from fruits and vegetables. Regular addition of these items to their diet will keep them from needing mineral supplements. Toss in as much as they'll eat – there is no real science to this. **Seedy berries, garden weeds and greens, especially plants that have gone to seed or are about to.** They won't eat what they don't need, or what they do not like. And they'll stop when they've had enough. This can significantly save on feed.

Salt may be provided by means of a block, or by giving them free choice salt. If you have a mineral block or mineral salts, this will be provided that way. In the wild they would get this through salt deposits and through naturally occurring food sources (another reason to give them a wide variety of foods).

Many Pigeon breeders who practice Colony rearing (large groups of birds in one housing structure) use a cafeteria style feeding system. They may cut holes in gallon milk jugs so the birds can eat but not climb on the feeders and foul the food. Other feeder styles work well for this also. They'll have a system with three to five feed containers, and fill each one with a different type of grain, legume, seed, or mix. They'll also have a mineral and grit feeder, and they'll add oystershell to that, or have a separate container for

that. The birds chose what they want, and the keeper just fills them on demand. As long as you provide a wide enough variety, this works ok. If you restrict it too much, you'll likely find that the thing they eat the most of is the one that is most expensive!

I'm actually not a fan of feeders at all, but if you use them I suggest that you use large enough feeders that they can stay full. Once you get into a habit of feeding once or twice a day, on empty feeders, the birds develop habits of mobbing the feeders, and gobbling more than they really need, because their instinct tells them that if food is only there in limited quantities at certain times, that they need to stock up. When food is there all the time, without restriction, they'll quickly settle into a pattern of eating when they are hungry, and eating what they are hungry for. If you opt to feed without feeders at all (which is best), they'll fall into a fairly natural pattern anyway, because they have to forage for their food, which is a long term prospect, taking a lot of time instead of having it handed to them ready to eat all in one place.

With a more natural feeding arrangement, you may still need feeders at certain times of year (if there is a lot of snow on the ground), though most of their feed can simply be scattered for forage, or hung. Feeders are sort of optional, unless you are keeping birds in cages where you have to provide everything. Even then, trays of growing foods that are slid in for them to enjoy can be immensely useful, and a few feed dishes may be all that is needed in each cage to feed them grain and legume mixes, or fresh produce goodies.

There is some research that suggests that Pigeons decline in health when given free choice food all the time, but again, this is research done with Racing Pigeons, processed commercial feed, and limited variety. In general, if the feed types are limited (insufficient variety), and if the Pigeons are confined and do not have to work for their feed, this is true. **One of the reasons we have always recommended forage feed and rough processed feed, is that it keeps the animals busier, they tend to keep their intelligence honed in the effort required to forage and extract the food, and it requires more energy for them to feed, keeping them more fit, and they tend to eat less overall – less time to just shovel it in.**

Pigeons on dirt do not need gravel. They'll dig their own grit from the soil, just as chickens do. They do need grit if they are raised on litter or on flooring, or if they are kept in cages. Many people give them mineral grit, which is an option if you cannot give them greens for minerals.

They will need a source of calcium. Oyster shell is fine, as are crushed eggshells. This is especially important during breeding, both for laying eggs and rearing young. Pigeons in the wild get this from natural sources in the soil or from bits of bone, shell, high calcium stones, etc. Calcium sources should be made available free choice all the time. You expect a lot from those Pigeons. You expect them to lay regularly, and to nourish a young bird with fast growing bones. Calcium is essential to their ability to meet your expectations.

Our methods for feeding animals has always been to look first at how they feed in the wild. Then we look at the things we can easily grow, or at substitutions that we can easily grow. Last we consider things we can buy cheaply enough to afford. This allows us to feed our animals a relatively natural, low cost diet of real FOOD, that the animals recognize as food.

Commercial methods are exactly the opposite. They look first at what is cheap, and try to make that fit an approximation of what the animal requires. They refine, extract, mill, and polish. They enhance, preserve, and heat treat. Industrial waste products are tossed in to make up bulk or meet final caloric needs. The end result is NOT food. And it is usually lacking essential elements – the short life span of commercial animals, and rapid production of inferior product conceals the deficits in the food fairly well. But **you do not want to duplicate this on the farm.** You want to affordably produce a superior product, and that starts with healthy, well-fed animals. You can't do that by imitating commercial production methods. You need to feed them real food.

I can't possibly list all of the things that pigeons eat in the wild (naturally – without the

interference of landfills and city litter or providers of stale bread). There are probably so many wildflower, weed, and wild grass seeds, herbs, berries, bushes and nuts that make up their diet that we can't possibly list them all. You may find many of them in your area by experimenting over time. I can include a list of things that they are known to eat that you can grow fairly easily though. There are others that are cheap to buy, which I've left out, simply because **the grains that are cheap to buy are often the worst foods for farm animals.**

- Millet
- Sorghum
- Amaranth
- Extra garden seed (let broccoli, lettuce, etc go to seed even if it is not good planting seed)
- Grass seed heads
- Wheat
- Oats
- Barley
- Rice
- Fresh or dried vegetables
- Alfalfa
- Alfalfa seed
- Sunflower Seed (Black Oil is best but they'll eat any)
- Corn
- Nuts (including acorns)
- Cowpeas
- Green peas (dried)
- Beans
- Berries (including some that are inedible to people)
- Some will eat bugs or invertebrates
- Pinecones with seeds in them
- Garden weeds, especially those going to seed
- Garden leftovers and extras, like sweet potato vine, pea vines, etc.
- Root crops – turnips, carrots, parsnips, potatoes, sweet potatoes, etc – not a natural part of their diet in the wild, but similar enough to foods they do eat
- Kefir, Buttermilk, Yogurt, or other probiotic dairy sources (also helps maintain health in other ways)
- Fresh or dried fruits, of many kinds.

One of the nice things about pigeons and growing your own grain or seeds for them is that their foods not need to be highly processed, and in fact, it is much better for them if it is not. Pigeons are pretty aggressive harvesters, and **they are happy to tear the corn off the cob, pull the wheat out of the ear, and rip the seeds right out of the Sunflower.** This can provide good activity for them, just make sure and put in enough pieces that they are not all fighting over one bit.

Nuts do not need to be neatly shelled. Just crushing them enough to break the shells is sufficient. The birds will happily pick out the good bits. Dry the sunflower seeds in the flower, and toss the flower heads in whole.

Let the Pigeons work for their food. It keeps them happier, and reduces the work that you need to do to keep up with it all if you are providing a natural diet for them.

Grains can be sprouted, or fermented prior to feeding. This does get them damp, so they don't work well in hopper style feeders if you do this. It can increase the protein and vitamin content of the grain. Many commercial scratch grains are heat treated to stop them from sprouting, so you'll have to get

untreated grains, or grow your own to provide sprouted grains to your birds, or to sprout them in trays for forage. Treated scratch grains can be fermented – but be careful, if you ferment them too long with too much water, you may get your Pigeons drunk.

You can dry or silage food for pigeons as well. Dried berries, pieces of dried fruit, dried vegetables, herbs and weeds, dried beans (even in the shell). Pigeons are natural foragers, so this is all food that they would forage for in winter time, or close substitutes that they'll eat anyway. Preserving food from your garden for your birds will save on winter feed – most of these items can be sun dried or strung up on string to dry from rafters, they don't require a food dryer. Many items may be root cellared, or pickled in large crocks to keep them through the winter for animal feed.

To preserve foods of this type for feed, you need to make sure that you can preserve and store large amounts, in an efficient way. The older more traditional ways of storing feed such as silage and drying, are generally less labor intensive.

Homegrown grains may be stored without threshing or winnowing. Nuts may be stored in barrels or buckets, unshelled, and so can beans or peas.

When flying wild, pigeons have a varied diet. We have a tendency as humans to want to simplify the feeding of an animal into a routine that is the same every day. But in nature, animals tend to eat a wider variety of foods. This gives them a full complement of vitamins and minerals. When we restrict them to the cheapest or easiest foods, even if we add in supplements, they lack the full vigor and resistance to disease and pests that they have in the wild. Nature illustrates this with wild animals – they are not plagued by disease unless something gets unbalanced, and often, disease sets in when the diet of the wild animal is restricted.

Supply your pigeons with a wide variety of grains, nuts, berries, fruits, and vegetables, with about half of the bulk coming from varied grains, and they'll thrive as nature intended.



Pigeons in the City

Whether you are in an intensely Urban area, or in the Suburbs, the issues regarding raising Pigeons for meat are the same. Pigeons are a frequent loophole in city ordinances and HOA agreements.

Pigeons, you see, are not farm animals. They are more often sport animals, or pets. There have been enough Pigeon fanciers who have lobbied to keep the raising of Pigeons legal or unregulated within city limits, and HOAs often do not even think of them when they set up their restrictions.

This means that many times, you can raise Pigeons where you cannot raise Chickens. Or you can raise Pigeons with fewer restrictions. You really need to check with your city or HOA though, to make sure, because there are some that are quirky, and as our cities get more dictatorial, raising Pigeons is one thing they are getting stickier about due to misinformation regarding feral Pigeons.

Pigeons have traditionally been raised on rooftops, in attics, on balconies, and in yards or even in dovecotes on outside walls. City rearing of pigeons is almost as old as the domestication of Pigeons! Having a yard gives you even more options. Pigeons were encouraged in many cities historically so they could be harvested for meat, and so their eggs could be gathered. Their droppings were also valued for fertilizer, and for their feathers.

There are still people who insist that you can let your Pigeons fly within the city. I do not recommend that. There are too many cities with extermination programs, and the food they will scavenge isn't exactly stuff you want to cycle through your meat! If you have specially bred birds, the risk of loss is simply too great – they cost too much. If you have ordinary Rock Doves, they stand a high risk of being removed as a nuisance. And your neighbors probably won't appreciate you if you let them out to fly around the neighborhood. It is, after all, really annoying to have someone else's birds making free with your newly planted grass seed, your gardens, or roosting on your car and spoiling the finish.

Living in close proximity to other people means that you need to be considerate of others. Pigeons do not smell, and are not noisy, so your neighbors may not even realize you have birds on your property if you keep them enclosed.

When raising them for meat in highly populated areas, you'll need to do your butchering indoors. It just won't do to hang the birds on the back fence where your neighbor's sensitivities may be offended. Offended neighbors tend to petition City Hall for ordinance changes! They won't just try to stop you from butchering in your back yard, they'll try to get your Pigeons banned entirely.

While healthy Pigeon droppings do not smell, you'll want to clean them up regularly, and compost them for use in growing food. Pigeons are a nice complement to Urban Gardening. They also work well with vermiculture or raising BSF larvae or mealworms as a food source for poultry.

One of the harder elements in raising Pigeons in the city is in using the entire animal to benefit your farm. On a rural farm, pigs, dogs, or even mink or ferrets (no, I'm not getting into the furrier debate, just listing them because some Pigeon keepers DO raise them), will clean up the leftovers after butchering. They'll all happily dispose of remains. Dogs do much better on a diet including raw meat and other fresh omnivore foods. In fact, your dog eats a lot like you do, just a little higher percentage of meat – they need their grains cooked, just like you do. So raising and butchering Pigeons can really help the health of your dog (dogs that eat a natural varied diet do not have problems with fleas like dogs fed dogfood do).

Black Soldier Fly Larvae will devour butchering remains. Chickens and ducks may or may not – and it isn't really a good idea to try without cooking the scraps first – a little too much like cannibalism, which some breeds of chickens are prone to engage in anyway. **Cats (which are pretty much pure carnivore) will happily gobble down poultry scraps of any kind**, and be healthier for it also, and in exchange they'll keep your Urban farm free of rodents and other vermin.

In the city you can't really raise pigs (other than Potbellied pigs and you usually have to have a special concession for that, as a pet only). You could keep a mink or ferret as a pet, or even reptilian pets to dispose of butchering scraps, but there is little useful purpose in them (and I really have a thing about useful purpose!). The markets for sale of such things as pets is fairly limited, and then you get into pet breeding and sales regulations.

There is a rather rambling point here, and that is that you'll want to find a practical use for the butchering leftovers. Raise something that can eat them, and in turn give you something else of value. It is always best if everything is used, and nothing is thrown in the garbage if it can be avoided. One of the wonders of Sustainable Polyculture Farming is that you create this wonderful interwoven cycle of benefit, where each element that you add into the mix benefits other elements, in a jumble of amazing synergy. You can create that same kind of synergy in an Urban or Suburban setting, but you may have to think more creatively to do it within the limitations imposed by ordinances and contracts.

In addition to meat and eggs, Pigeons also offer droppings, as mentioned already. They are high nitrogen, so they work great on high feeder plants such as tomatoes and watermelon. They should not be considered to be a problem, but an asset, to be used to help produce more food for you, and to help produce feed for the Pigeons themselves. If you have surplus, it might be a salable item.

Pigeon manure is a high nitrogen component to add to composting also, and will help to heat up a compost pile if you are using it for heating a greenhouse.

You can grow a number of crops in small spaces to help feed your Pigeons. Intensive gardening helps you fit a lot into small spaces, and you can dry the things that grow very well for winter feed.

Don't overlook the feathers either, another item with value in a small production setting. They can be used to stuff pillows, for crafts, to sell, or they can be composted to return more organic matter back into crop production. Pigeon feathers require special handling to remove mites, covered in a later chapter.

It is theoretically possible to set up a small scale commercial squab facility within city limits, but this is more problematic than doing so in the county where it is more acceptable. Many people did this in town during the Depression, but again, our world has changed a great deal since then. It would probably be more feasible to sell live squab than to attempt to dress them out and sell them (if regulations in your state or city allowed that). Selling breeding pigeons might be a possibility also, though to do so, you'd be advertising that you were raising pigeons. **Once you cross the line between raising animals for your own benefit, to commercial production (even on a small scale), the rules change somewhat, and things become more technical from a management standpoint.** I think that if approached creatively, with a firm understanding of any regulatory issues within your area, you would probably find some kind of means of making money from your pigeons.

It is easy to trap pigeons in your yard in the city. It is also possible to set up a loft with a means for pigeons to get in, but not get out, which is baited, and which pigeons will drop in on periodically, gradually building a flock. Dovecotes in the yard need only to be erected to attract pigeon pairs to nest. Of course, the real issue here is not whether you CAN do it, but whether it is worth it to do it. You'll generally get healthy pigeons, though they will be the smaller wild pigeons, and not commercial sized squab producing pigeons. They'll produce squabs, but they'll be smaller (Depression Era pigeons were this type). If you do not let them out to fly wild again, chances are their systems will clear of the majority of chemical build-up from potential poor diets by the time they produce their first young.

Even in the city or suburbs, Pigeons have the potential to be raised profitably, whether that means simply producing meat and eggs for your table at a cost that saves you over the grocery store prices, or whether it means actually producing some salable items at a profit, it is entirely achievable. It is just a little more complicated to work out the details in town, than doing so outside of city limits.

Most of it hinges on ordinances and regulations. Study up on those for your state, and city, prior to diving in, and make sure you stay within the legal requirements. Then be considerate of your neighbors, so nobody has a rational reason to complain. It is more likely this way that your neighbors will ask you how to do it, rather than trying to stop you from doing it.



Difference Between Pigeon Loft and Chicken Coop

Chicken coops are everywhere. You can buy nice pre-made coops, you can find plans for chicken coops, and you can build chicken tractors or portable cages. Chickens, it seems, are everywhere, along with their housing.

Pigeon lofts, on the other hand, are pretty much homemade affairs, or very costly. There are no standardized designs, they haven't been commercialized yet.

So will a chicken coop work for Pigeons? Yes, it will, but Pigeons do have some requirements that are different than chickens. The basic differences between a Pigeon Loft and a Chicken Coop are as follows:

- **Chickens share nests. Pigeons do not!** Most chicken coops share up to 4 birds per nest, requiring that laying hens share a nest.
- **Pigeons require one nest per nesting pair** for standard breeding, two nests per pair for intensive breeding.
- **Pigeons share floor and roost space better than Chickens.** Ok, they really don't SHARE it better, they simply require less per bird, because they spend more time in the nest, and they are smaller birds. Chickens lay an egg in a nest box, and then leave, unless they are broody. Pigeons stay busier than chickens, raising young.
- **Pigeons need flying space to stay as healthy as possible.** You absolutely CAN raise them in cages or smaller chicken coop type structures, but they do best if they have a roof height of at least 7 ft, and a flight pen attached to the housing. Chickens can do with low runs, Pigeons need higher ones.
- **Most chickens need roosts that don't require flying to access.** They also need nest boxes that can be accessed with a minimum of flying because most utility chickens do not fly well. Pigeons may be able to use high roosts and nest boxes better. Heavy utility breed Pigeons may not fly well either, but they will fly well enough to access high roosts and nests.
- **More Pigeons fit in less space, as long as you have more nest boxes.** They are more closely comparable to Bantams than full sized chickens.
- **Pigeon coops need watering and feeding systems suitable to Pigeons, not Chickens.**
- **Protection from drafts is more critical in winter for Pigeons, because they will often still be raising young.** Likewise, ventilation of the housing in the summer is more critical, because Pigeons will still be raising young. They cannot escape outdoors all of the time like Chickens can, to find a shady spot.

The biggest issue in using a small chicken coop for Pigeons is the number of nest boxes. Many tiny coops have two nest boxes. Pigeons really do better in flocks of three pairs or more, and if you are breeding them in hopes of expanding a flock, such a small coop won't last you very long! When coping with a small coop, you can use a single nest per pair. You'll have to gather eggs until the young are either butchered or fledged, and then let the parents raise another pair of young.

Still, a pre-fab chicken coop can do the job in a pinch, as long as you have sufficient nest boxes for your pigeon pairs. It isn't ideal, but when you are just starting out and having to make do with what you can afford, you can make it work for limited amounts of Pigeons.



Difference Between Pigeon Loft and Dovecote

The term “dovecote” is a rather ambiguous term. In general, anything that houses either Pigeons or Doves can be called a Dovecote, but when referring to them, people are more likely to refer to certain types more as Dovecotes, and other types more as Lofts.

Dovecote is the older term. It is now used more to refer specifically to older pigeon buildings, typically round or rectangular, which were nothing more than walls of pigeon nests, and a cupola or bellfry style fixture on the top, or a window in the side, through which Pigeons could enter, but which had openings sized so that Hawks and other predators could not get in. The holes for nests lined the walls inside, and were serviced by means of a ladder or a rotating ladder called a “potence” if they went above the reach of a person. From these walls of nests, we get the desk term, “pigeon hole”.

Dovecote also refers to the smaller more ornamental outdoor birdhouse style Pigeon houses, which were either mounted on a pole, or affixed to a dwelling. These were also serviced by means of a ladder. They may have as few as 3 nest openings, or as many as hundreds, but you typically see 6-24 nest holes, which is a nice manageable number for a family.

Dovecotes were sometimes built in to dwellings instead of being affixed to the sides. You can see this in many historical buildings, where there are a series of holes in a pattern near the peak of the roof. Pigeons love attics, and this allowed maintenance from inside rather than outside. This is becoming used again in some pigeon control efforts, where pigeons are given roosting space, and their eggs are removed from their nests and replaced with dummies, to reduce pigeon populations.

Pigeon Loft is a newer term, often used in regard to indoor housing for Pigeons, constructed in an upper room in a house, on a roof, or even in a yard or on a porch. Often, a window was used to allow pigeons in and out, and still may be for some people who allow their pigeons to fly – rooftop versions have a means of access that allows the pigeons in, but which prevents them going out again until they are let loose, and which prevents the entrance of predators.

Pigeon lofts are generally more cage-like than a dovecote, and are frequently designed for outside maintenance and upkeep. They are often constructed with large portions built in wire mesh instead of wood or bricks in the manner of a historic dovecote. Such a structure may still be referred to as a Pigeon Loft, even if it is built on the ground.

You can really call your Pigeon house anything you want – Dovecote and Pigeon Loft are but two of the more common names by which they are called today. There are all sorts of ethnic and historical names, including some that are quite poetic.

- Columbarium (Roman)
- Pigeonnier (French)
- Doocot (Scottish)
- Culvery (Cornish)
- Pigeon Tower or Pigeon House
- Pigeon Coop
- Pigeoncote

Dig out your sense of romance, and call it what you like. You'll create Pigeon housing that is unique to your situation and needs, so you might as well name it the same way!



Nesting Methods

Pigeons really aren't picky. In the wild they'll nest just about anywhere that allows them enough space to throw together a nest – they are like the hillbillies of birddom. A rickety old shack is fine with them, as long as the roof does not leak. They like to be sheltered some from the wind and the rain. They like even better to have some protection against predators. But they'll nest just about anywhere regardless of the finer points of home aesthetics.

You can provide nesting areas for them that range from the simple, to the elaborate.

- **Bowls on the floor.** Large dog size bowls are happily utilized by almost any pigeon pair.
- **Bowls on a shelf.** They like being higher up better than being on the floor.
- **Bowls on a shelf, with dividers** between the nests for pairs (either single or double nest systems). If you put two bowls together, and a divider between every two, your pairs then have two nests each.
- **Milk crates on the floor,** fastened to the wall, or set on a shelf. You can put bowls in the milk crates, or not. Wide milk crates may hold two bowls. Milk crates can be upright, or turned on their sides.
- **Wooden boxes,** used the same way as milk crates.
- **5 gallon buckets,** cut in half and set out like a bowl.
- **5 gallon buckets with an opening cut in half of the lid,** with the bucket bottom fastened to the wall or with the bucket set in a frame on its side.
- **Chicken style nest boxes, with a front lip** – either square or diagonal styles are fine.
- **Chicken style nest boxes, with a roost** in front.
- **Chicken style nest boxes with a shelf** in front – the shelf can be narrow, or wide, depending on what you have on hand. Pigeons will use it however you make it.
- **Large Pottery jars,** on their sides, with about a 7" opening. This mimics their natural habitat, and is how doves were built in some areas anciently – pottery jars embedded on their sides in adobe walls.
- **Nests built into the wall** with cut openings for the pigeons (harder to check and maintain than open nests).

As long as the nests are large enough – about **12X 14-18 inches is standard**, depending on the size and breed – pigeons will accept and nest in almost any accommodations that suggest that they do so.

One of the major choices that you make is whether to use a single nest system, or a double nest system.

Using a single nest system, pigeons may lay eggs before the young squabs are ready for removal, but they may not successfully incubate them. Generally a single nest system results in lower production of squabs, and it is best if you gather any eggs that they lay before the squabs are removed.

Using a double nest system, any eggs are moved to a nest beside the current nest where the female can incubate the eggs, and the male continue to raise the young. This is said to result in higher production.

The key to high production in both systems though, has less to do with space, and more to do with feeding. Well fed Pigeons reproduce well. Poorly fed Pigeons do not. Feral Pigeons will rapidly multiply to consume available food sources, and so will domesticated Pigeons. If you feed them and give them appropriate nesting conditions, they'll just do what they do naturally – multiply and multiply.

You might as well have some fun with your nesting options. Get creative with it if you want, and make something awesome. The Pigeons might not appreciate your artistry, but they'll appreciate the utility of it, and you can wow your friends instead of the Pigeons.



Individual Cages

Contrary to the claims of some sources, Pigeons can be raised in cages. They do best in a cage that allows each pair some nice moving around space.

For a long time, people believed that Pigeons needed to fly to be healthy. While they naturally do fly, and it is best if you can provide them an environment in which they can do so, this is not always possible for reasons of available space. I sincerely believe that we should give animals the best conditions we can. But I also know that when we need to raise animals for survival, we often have to compromise, and give them merely adequate conditions, and not excellent ones.

Pigeons are now raised commercially in battery style cages attached to the wall, in the same way that Rabbits are raised commercially. A pigeon cage is usually about 2.5 to 3 feet high, and about 2 feet deep, and 2.5 to 3 feet wide. In general, one cage holds one pair. When you are coping with very small spaces, fights will break out if you do not have sufficient room, so it is unwise to put two pair in a single small cage if that is their only living space.

The advantages of cage rearing as stated by commercial producers, include the following:

- Cuts down on fighting.
- Makes selective breeding easier.
- Allows individual food control and monitoring.
- Allows for more automation of care processes.
- Makes record keeping on individual cages possible (though you could easily number nests and record on a note tablet to enter into a spreadsheet just as easily, as long as you check periodically to ensure that pairs have not shifted).

Raising pigeons in battery style cages can be lucrative. The Pigeons seem to produce well in that environment. I am not recommending this as an ideal Squab or egg production method – there are those who do though. I just feel that birds ought to have space to be birds, and for Pigeons, that means at least a little space to stretch their wings. If this were my only option though, I'd still do it.

Cages may be an excellent option for selective breeding, when combined with a shared flight pen. Pigeons are not like chickens in this respect. If you are breeding chickens, they cannot share space or they will have to be separated again for breeding. Because Pigeons are monogamous, and territorial, you can establish them in a space (nest, cage, etc), and once they are nesting, they'll return to the nest. So shared flight space works just great. You have cages that you can use to confine them until breeding takes place, with larger flight space for health and more natural keeping.

It is best to have more than one breeding pair. Pigeons are social birds, they congregate in flocks, and this is one reason why cage rearing was thought to be impractical by most breeders. When they are in cages that separate them by wire, which they can see through, and hear other birds through, the disadvantages of isolation of pairs in cages is greatly diminished.

Cages are a realistic option for keeping Pigeons on a balcony or in small spaces. Cages can be stacked, with a tray between for cleanup, if the cage bottom is wire. If it is wood, then the cage can be shoveled out using a dustpan.

Many Pigeon cages are built with a balcony in the back half, providing an upstairs and downstairs. The nests are usually placed in the upstairs. A cage that is 2.5 to 3 ft high has just enough space to divide in half vertically. A wood or plastic shelf facilitates nesting options.

Cage raising is usually on wire – the bottom of the cage is made of 1/2" hardware cloth. This needs

to be reinforced, either with PVC supports, or with aluminum wire reinforcement about every 6-9 inches across the bottom. Otherwise the weight of the birds will cause it to sag. You can do it with 1X2 wood, turned on edge, but it does not clean as well.

Cages can be built from almost anything in a pinch. Each building option has its own limitations and benefits, there really isn't any "best" way to do it.

If you find that you are having to raise Pigeons in cages when you'd rather be giving them more freedom, it can help to bring as much of the wild in to them as you can. You can still hang foods from the cage sides, or provide trays of growing food for them – scratch grains can even be sprinkled in live food growing trays after the tray is put into the cage. Providing as much variety as you can for them, and bringing them more whole foods that they have to work at to eat will help give them productive tasks to keep them active and healthy. They'll be much happier if they have to work a bit at their food. Much better for them than always handing them food that is bite sized and takes no effort from them to work it into a usable form, such as having to dig nuts out of the shells, having to extract peas from the pod, or having to work an apple apart.

Cages with wire mesh bottoms make cleanup of droppings easier. But they create some issues for food. If Pigeons scatter their food while picking out the best bits, that food falls into the dropping trays and is wasted. If you feed them scraps of vegetables, they'll lose some through the flooring also, because even if you put it in a dish, they won't leave it there, they'll drag it out so they can eat it more comfortably, off the floor. When it gets small enough to fall through, they'll lose it. There is no good solution there, you have to decide which benefit you want most.

We used to put larger dishes underneath the smaller ones in the cages, to catch some of the scattered food, which helped a little, but it only caught about half of it, which we could then dump back in their feeders (though I suspect they just picked it out and threw it around again!). Pigeons are like chickens in this respect. If you give them mixed food, they'll treat it like a kid with Lucky Charms, and pick out all the fun bits first.

One thing we dislike about cages is that it is hard to get natural sunlight for the birds. You end up either needing to locate them near a window that can be opened, in an outdoor environment (which makes blocking drafts and weather more difficult), or using artificial lighting. None of the choices are optimal. Sunlight helps them maintain good health though, and is important enough to think about when locating cages.

If you choose cages as a means of raising your Pigeons, you may get some flack from purists or people who have no comprehension of what it means to raise animals well. They equate the word "cage" with what they've seen in films about commercial ag, where animals are given insufficient space, and are factory fed and treated like machines. What we are recommending if you need to use cages is not like that at all. Stand your ground, and know that your animals are NOT being mistreated if you give them roomy cages with feed that is as natural as possible, and good nesting space.

Our preference is for a combination of cages and dovecotes, but in reality that doesn't always work like we want either. It just depends upon what is available at the time, in resources, space, existing buildings, etc.

Locate your cages where your birds are protected from winds in the winter, and where they won't overheat in the summer. Your pigeons can happily raise their young even in a fairly small space per pair.



Colony Rearing

The most common way to raise Utility Pigeons is in a communal Dovecote or Pigeon Loft. This is also the most economical type of housing for Pigeons. Many pairs share common space, but each has their own territorial space, which may be a nest box, or a nest box with shelf space in front of it. Flight pens are also shared space.

There are some squabbles – indeed, this is where that word originated! They'll tussle over food, girls, space, a favorite perch, etc. Pigeons do establish a sort of pecking order, just like chickens do, and the order is not dependent upon the size of the bird. It is more a personality thing.

Colony rearing can be done by either letting nature take its course, with birds choosing their own mates, or you can override nature and pair them up according to a selective breeding program.

Typical colony rearing leaves it to Nature. You can alter that by creating spaces that you can use to deliberately pair pigeons until they have successfully mated, either by using isolation cages, cages which are built into the colony facility, or by creating nests in such a way that they can be used for this purpose (you'd need food and water provisions, and space for the Pigeons to mate). There is definitely scope for a creative approach in how you create facilities to allow you to easily selectively pair Pigeons.

Since all resources are generally shared, it is important that you keep feed and water freely available at all times. If you do not, you'll lose birds in the competitive environment.

Recommended floor space per bird usually varies between 1 ½ square feet, and 2 square feet per bird, depending on who is doing the recommending, though some sources recommend as high as 4 square feet per bird. You may have local ordinances that specify what you can do. Avoid overcrowding, because it will lead to increased stress on the birds. You can go with minimum per-bird floorspace if you have good flight pens for daytime use, but even then be as generous as you can.

It is also a good idea to provide a separate area where you can house young maturing Pigeons if you are breeding replacement birds, or breeding birds for sale as something other than squab. Pigeons wean just prior to fledging, so about the time they are ready to fledge, they can be separated into the growing area. Either a grow-out pen (partitioned off in your dovecote), or a separate facility will work fine – it needs perches, but no nest boxes. They grow better when they do not have to contend with breeding males. If eggs start appearing in your grow-out pen, then your young birds are old enough to be breeding. You can either pair them up, or let them select for themselves, which they will do if left in the group setting.

Banding your Pigeons is more important in a Colony rearing setting, so you can identify specific birds. Productivity can be tracked by numbering nest boxes, and by use of a spreadsheet, just verify leg bands at the beginning of each nesting cycle to be sure the Pigeons have not shuffled.

Keeping unmatched birds out of the Colony is also important if you want to keep your pairs stable. While Pigeons do mate for life in general, there are things that can disrupt the bond. If you have an unpaired bird in the colony, this is one of the things that can cause pairs to shift. It is more likely to happen with a spare male than female, but does happen either way. This is what would happen naturally in a large flock in the wild. Part of the process of natural selection. Of course, in a large flock in the wild, the young are also left to make their own way with the older birds – again, part of the process of natural selection. The stronger birds thrive. You can choose to just let nature take her course, and accept the outcomes if you choose to let her do the selecting instead of doing it yourself.

Pigeons are bred to be pragmatists. Survival of the species is paramount in their instinct and habit. It makes them very flexible where breeding and keeping are concerned. They do not like disruptions to their bonds, but they accept them and form new bonds. This is how a species survives, after all, and

Pigeons are exceptionally good at surviving.

Some breeders choose to separate their pairs during certain stressful seasons of the year, and then re-pair them when they want to start up breeding again. If that occurs, and you let them pair up by themselves, they won't necessarily go back to the former mate. Disrupting the bond may cause a permanent disruption. Basically, there are better ways to impede breeding than this – replacing eggs with dummies is better, and far less stressful on the birds.

It does mean though, that if you need to shuffle birds for selective breeding reasons, that you can. It would not be wise to put former pairs back into the same Colony though, it may induce fighting, and undo the re-pairing.

In a Colony setting, if you choose to control certain things, then you need to control them all the way through. If you choose to let things unfold more like they would in the wild, you can do that too. Honestly the Pigeons are going to thrive either way – **long history shows us that if you provide sufficient food, water, and nest boxes, the Pigeons will pretty much take care of everything else and produce an abundance of meat and eggs for your table.** It also shows us that if you choose to take an active hand in selectively optimizing the production, they'll respond well to that also.

Colony rearing provides you with options for the least amount of work, and the least complicated management. If you just want good meat on the table, and to produce good breeders without controlling every aspect of breeding, this is a good choice (you still have the majority of control through selection of breeders and culling). It is also a good choice for small commercial operations for the production of meat or eggs.



Flight Pens

While a flight pen is not strictly required, you'll have healthier Pigeons if you provide a pen where they can exercise, and where you can give them some natural forage, and good access to sunshine and outdoor air.

A flight pen should really not be smaller than about 8X8 ft, and it needs to be at least 7 ft high to give them room to fly a little. At that, they really aren't going to have that much flight space, but it will be enough to let them exercise their wings.

An assortment of perches is useful as well. They can be put as high as you like, and can be creatively made. Pigeons will perch on pretty much anything that sticks out – branches, dowels, 2X2s, shelves, whatever.

Many people enjoy making their flight pen up like a park, including benches where they can sit to enjoy their birds. I'm in favor of that, though I don't recommend gravel or concrete bases for a flight pen. They don't really help keep things cleaner, but they do cost much more, and gravel will just end up un-cleanable anyway.

Grass, weeds, or other ground covers are useful in a flight pen. If you have a lot of birds in a little space, you'll have trouble keeping them from scratching and eating it down to the dirt. Growing frames can help with this, and ease up your feed burden a little as well.

A very large flight pen is preferable when you can afford it and when you have the space. Since the top has to be enclosed, with tight enough mesh to keep the pigeons in, and predators out, designing your pen around commonly available mesh roll widths can help make the construction easier. Chicken wire comes in 6, and 8 ft widths. You'd need some kind of supports under any seams in the mesh, but not necessarily under the entire length of the mesh – J-clips, like those used for rabbit cages, can be used to fasten edges of the wire together, every 4" or so, as an alternative to a wood support under it.

If you build your pen 8 ft wide, and as long as you like, the top wiring can be rolled out across it with no seams. Supports under it, about every 8 ft are a good idea – they can be wood, PVC, Rebar, or anything else you've got on hand.

Chicken wire is cheap, and will stand up to many threats, but is no match for a hawk. If you have hawks in your area, you'll want to make sure to use a heavier wire with LESS than a 2" square mesh (two inches is too large, it will let in weasels). If you have coons, you'll want to make sure that all door and window latches are coon-proof.

Your flight pen can be built off the main door of your dovecote, eliminating the need for a special door for your Pigeons. Just open the main door to the dovecote in the morning, to let the birds out, and close it up at night to keep them secure from predators. In this way, your flight pen only needs to be secure enough for daytime, and your dovecote can be built to protect from night predators (which are generally more aggressive and more plentiful). This also helps you avoid accidental releases from the dovecote when you open the door – you have the pen to safeguard behind you.

It is a good idea to provide some form of shade for your Pigeons as well. You can roof over part of the flight pen, put shade cloth over a portion, or you can build your flight pen around some small trees which will provide shade and roosting for the birds. A gazebo with perches inside is also a nice way to provide both shade, and perches. Shade gives the birds a way to stay cooler on very hot days, since the dovecote may warm up quite a bit in hot weather.

If your pen has sufficient groundspace, pretty much all feeding can be done outdoors, in a more natural setting, by scattering it on the ground. This not only helps with keeping the pigeons occupied

throughout the day (since they have to work to hunt their food more), but it also helps them to get grit, and probiotics from the soil.

They can do their bathing in the pen also, to keep the coop dry. This gives you more options for providing bathing water for the Pigeons.

While you may not be able to let Pigeons fly loose in the world you live in, a good flight pen can make up for some of the lack, and go a long way toward giving your birds the extra edge of health that makes keeping them more affordable and manageable.



Free Ranging Pigeons

I'll state up front that when I have specialized breeds of Utility Pigeons, I will not let them fly free. Since I don't raise sporting birds that require flight, or recreational birds that are flyers, I feel it is more important to protect my birds, and to be considerate of my neighbors.

There are only certain circumstances under which I would free-range Pigeons.

- **First, if I were raising Feral Pigeons – Common Rock Doves.** Their value is lower, and they are indistinguishable from other wild and feral pigeons. If they are caught by a hawk, or taken down by someone trying to exterminate Pigeons, or trapped by someone else, the loss is not great. If you lose a bird with a \$200 replacement value, that is something different!
- **Second, if I had an idea of where they were likely to go, and felt that it was fairly safe** – for example, in an isolated area in the middle of miles and miles of forest or grasslands.
- **Third, if I knew it would not harm my neighbors.** I would not do so if we were located on the edge of farmland where our birds were feeding on the crops of others. Not only is that a good way to get your birds shot, it is simply unfair to farmers who are struggling to keep their crop production profitable.
- **Fourth, if I were not housing a huge number of Pigeons.** Perhaps a dozen or two, at most. That many is not enough to significantly impact the region if you are not in a suburb. More than that, and it just is not reasonable to expect the land to support them, unless you have your own crops for them to feed upon.

If you do choose to free-range them, they'll require some special provisions.

New birds should be confined for about a few months, or until they are breeding. They should be given the ability to see outside and orient themselves to their surroundings. Young pigeons that have been raised in your lofts should also be given that kind of opportunity – to orient themselves to their locality, by time in a flight pen, or by perches placed near a window or a cage on a roof, or some means that lets them view the outside world.

They can be let out in the morning, and given a means of returning through a one-way entrance, so they can come back without your assistance. There are several means of doing this, through openings they can drop through, or through a one-way gate. A food and water source can be placed where they can access it after they enter. The entrance should be small enough that a Pigeon can enter, but common predators cannot, and it must be closed up at night. A hawk, coon, or cat can wreak havoc on a loft or holding pen in short order!

Pigeons are likely to make wiser choices about food than you think. While they are always on the lookout for a free meal, and will eat bakery bread from people who feed them, or other leftovers, for the most part, they are going to seek out a wider variety of foods than you have any idea of. They'll usually be healthier than you think if feeding themselves, even if you think they are not getting great choices. The one exception is sprayed fields. That will catch them off guard. There ARE real health risks here, but they are less than what many people may think they are. I stress this in other chapters simply because I am, myself, so very sensitive to chemicals, and do not want any in my own animals if I can help it, and I want others who may have the same problem to be fully aware of the risks.

I love the idea of letting our pigeons come and go as they choose. I love the idea of letting them be the wild creatures they are. But reality tells me that this isn't the wisest choice for our particular farm goals. We are considering some roller pigeons for fun, and that would change our goals for those particular birds, so nothing is ever written in stone, but for us, with Utility birds, free ranging does not look like a practical option for some time to come. If it is for you, then be aware of the risks, and do your best to protect your birds and keep them safe and healthy.



Trapping Wild Pigeons

The reason we are discussing this has more to do with the legality and practicality than it does with the actual process of trapping Pigeons.

Pigeons may be trapped using any live animal trap of the correct size, baited with any kind of grain. It is also fairly easy to build a trap, using a one-way gate which allows the Pigeon to enter, but not leave.

Pigeons are more easily trapped if there are other Pigeons already in the trap. This leaves the decoy Pigeons vulnerable to attack if predators can get in though. You also need to make sure that any decoy Pigeons have sufficient food and water for their needs, and enough for bait remaining.

Now, we do need to discuss the legality of trapping Pigeons. It varies from place to place, but in general it is legal to trap Feral Pigeons (Rock Doves), but NOT legal to trap other native wild Pigeons (Band Tailed Pigeons, or other Doves). Rock Doves and Band Tailed Pigeons look similar, but Rock Doves have two bands on their wings, Band Tailed have a white collar on the back of their neck.

Placing any kind of trap may be illegal without a license in some states.

Be aware that it is the TRAP that is typically illegal. In a few places it is illegal to CAPTURE or HOLD feral pigeons, but that is the rare exception. Usually what they are objecting to is the trap, because traps, by their nature, are left unattended, and may not catch what they intended to catch. Other birds (some which may be illegal for you to possess) may wander into the trap.

So, if it IS legal in your area, and if you decide to give it a try, the pigeons you'll end up with will be common Rock Doves, or Feral Pigeons. This is the kind of Pigeons that were domesticated thousands of years ago, and which were used for Squab and eggs until recent history. They are the breed that was kept during the Depression. As a useful bird, they are right up there! No need to feel ashamed if you choose to own this type (you may be able to purchase breeding birds of this type also, and sometimes people will give them away).

It may be wiser to simply set up an outdoor dovecote, and let it fill up. Once it is full, you can then remove pairs (at night when they are bedded down) to bring into a more contained environment. If you do so, a small dovecote is recommended, so you do not annoy the neighbors. Just make sure it is legal for you to do so in your area.

If you trap or capture birds, you'll have to discover their gender, and let them pair up. The first go-round will be a bit of a guess, but once you have offspring from them, whose parentage you can begin to track, you can breed up, and select for traits that you desire. Within five generations you can have registerable stock with some registries, if you keep track of parentage.

You do need to spend some time taming them enough to be handled, and you'll need to keep them enclosed until they are successfully breeding, or for a few months for them to claim your housing as home, if you intend to let them continue to fly wild.

Many sources will address the ease of which you can trap Feral Pigeons, and how easy it is to domesticate them, use them for meat and eggs, etc. They fail to address issues relevant to the world we live in today – most are based on reminiscences of experiences in childhood, or stories told by their parents or grandparents. The relevancy may not be appropriate in all cases.

Please make sure you know the laws regarding Feral Pigeons and other Pigeons in your state before you attempt to trap or capture wild Pigeons. Also make sure you can identify Feral Pigeons, and not get them confused with wild Native Pigeons. It may just save you a lot of grief.



Predation

Lots of things like to eat Pigeons. Lots of things like to eat Pigeon eggs. Not that we can blame them, we just don't like it if THEY get there first, and take those birds that we have been feeding, especially if those birds happen to be valuable breeding stock (and the rules of farming dictate that it is ALWAYS your best breeder that the hawk gets!).

Protecting your birds from predation involves two basic principles:

1. **Don't let them fly wild** unless you want to risk having them taken by a predator (or disposed of by exterminators).
2. **Keep their coop, loft, or flight pen predator proof.**

The first principle has been covered sufficiently elsewhere, so I'll focus on the second.

Peregrine Falcons are perhaps the number one predator for Pigeons. In some areas, up to 80% of the diet of Falcons have been made up of Pigeons.

In North America, other common predators include Opossums, Raccoons, Red-tailed Hawks, Great Horned Owls, Eastern Screech-owls, Goshawks and Sparrowhawks, and Weasels or Ferrets. In farm communities and rural areas, foxes, coyotes, badgers, skunks, cats, snakes, and other predators may be an issue. Snakes can be a major issue with birds in some areas.

So basically, the most common predators will be airborne, and mostly during the daytime (except for owls). Falcons and Hawks are the most prevalent. Much of this risk is minimized by not letting them fly, but hawks can be aggressive enough to rip through netting that will keep out some other predators, if they are motivated to get at a tasty bit of prey behind the wire. Plastic netting won't even slow them down. Wire will if it is heavy enough.

Birds of prey will generally avoid areas with a lot of aerial clutter, such as power lines and trees that get in the way of diving and snatching. Some people have reported hawks ripping through lightweight cage wiring, such as chicken wire, though it is more unusual for them to do that. The greatest danger from birds of prey are from diving snatches.

Digging predators can be kept out of cage areas by digging a trench, and burying the edge of the wire down about 18 inches. If you use PVC coated wire, it will protect it from rusting out. It is a lot of work to do this, but it can really help, and is less costly, and healthier for your birds than putting them on cement or wood, which is the only other option.

Elevating the coop by a foot or so can also help, because it will expose any digging predators, and keep them from engaging in a long term project without you noticing. Just make sure you elevate it enough to really see under there – otherwise it can provide a nice little den area for skunks or feral cats.

Make sure there are no holes and gaps where animals can get in. You are NOT going to be able to keep out mice. They'll get in. They just do, even when you think they can't. Pigeons can defend against mice. They may not be able to defend against rats, but rats are usually less common, and less likely to sneak in during the daytime when the coop is open for the birds to move in and out.

The size of the hole in your bird wire is also fairly important. A 2" mesh will allow weasels and ferrets to pass easily. You need something smaller, and still fairly heavy. A 1" mesh will keep out most things. Some people use 1/2" mesh everywhere, because it will keep out the majority of snakes that would eat eggs or prey on squabs. You could probably use it on the bottom 2-3 ft of the pens and achieve fairly good protection, as long as there are no trees overhead, or climbing vegetation on the Pigeon pen.

The next issue is latches. Coons can be very crafty about getting into animal containment and feed containers. They are pretty determined and clever. Make sure you have latches that they cannot undo, and if possible, more than one kind of latch on any outside doors.

Last, confine the birds at night for best protection. They'll go to their nests and roosts anyway for the night, just close the door. Most non-flying predators are nocturnal, so keeping them out by good doors and latches keeps the birds safer.

There is a fine balance between letting your birds live the most natural existence possible, and acknowledging the responsibility to limit their freedom to a certain extent so that you can protect them. I deplore the necessity of this, and my libertarian tendencies rebel at the notion of enslavement as a means of protection, but also know that I cannot afford to lose animals to a persistent predator. I also have a stewardship over them that I take seriously.

Predators, happening upon a nice food source, will return to it again and again. They'll keep trying if they think they have a chance at a fine meal. If you accept predation as the cost of raising animals, you'll find that the cost can be very high. So you have to NOT accept it, and be just as determined as the predators are to get an easy meal, to NOT let them get an easy meal. This is part of the stewardship of a farmer, once they bring animals under their care.

The reality is that you WILL lose animals to predation. At some point you will have a flock systematically decimated by an animal you could not best. It happens to every farmer. But the more vigilant and conscientious you are to start with, the less your losses will be, and the easier it will be to respond to plug the one hole you neglected to plug initially.

I also recommend a good dog. Livestock Guardian dogs can generally be taught to protect poultry as part of their flock. Bird dogs never will be able to grasp that birds are not prey, they'll always chase them. English Collies and similar old time farm shepherds are about half and half – some will get it, some will not. Some have a bit too much birding instinct bred into them, some have more guardian instinct bred in, and most have a dominant herding instinct.

A good guardian dog can go a long way toward deterring animal predators, both from the ground and from the air, and can also help avert malicious acts from people (which do happen from time to time). A good livestock guardian will patrol most of the night, and cautious predators won't take the chance on crossing them. **They are your best defense against foxes and coyotes.**

A live animal trap may also be of use, for catching coons, and opossums. Weasels and Ferrets take a particular type of trap that they can't back out of.

Be aware that if you use a live-trap, you can't just relocate the animal. Most predatory animals have a pretty large territory, and they'll come right back if you move them less than a hundred miles or more, or across some kind of habitat barrier through which they could not survive. With larger predators, the range can be many hundreds of miles. Even if you move them far, they'll surprise you and end up right back.

Predators also tend to multiply the way the Pigeon does. If there is food available, they'll expand their populations based on the available food. So if you live in an area with a high number of coons, that is because there is a lot of food for coons where you live. Coons will always be a problem. Coon-proof your Pigeon habitation, or you'll just be feeding the coons and increasing their populations further. **They won't go away!** You can trap them, kill them, and wage war on them, but the numbers are pretty much going to stay stable because of the food sources that you can't control.

Predators are part of the reality of keeping any kind of poultry, so take it seriously, and prepare well. Well protected housing can go a long way toward keeping Pigeons affordable, or profitable.



Health Hazards in Raising Pigeons

The health hazards that are commonly associated with raising Pigeons by alarmists are not as serious a risk as they make them sound. For one thing, many of them are perpetuated by exterminators – who get paid if you think that Pigeons are a health hazard.

That said, there are some people who do have allergies to Pigeon feathers and dander, and there are some conditions which can develop if you keep your Pigeons in unnatural conditions.

There are three infections typically associated with Pigeon manure. Histoplasmosis, cryptococcosis, and psittacosis (there are others, but these are the ones people really worry about). They are bacterial or fungal infections, caused by high concentrations of nitrogen in the soil, or aggravated by lack of air circulation in the Pigeon housing (incidentally, other Poultry carry the same risks). **In general, these three diseases, and others, won't be a problem if proper precautions are taken – and it does NOT mean trying to keep things sterile!**

Nature has a way of taking care of these things, if you give Her the right conditions in which to do so. These are the things that contribute to healthy Pigeon environs, for you, and your birds.

- **Ventilation** – outdoor or well ventilated housing. If you live in a warm climate, you can wire off the sides instead of using solid structures.
- **Work from outside cages** instead of inside a loft. If you are sensitive to dander or feathers, build cages that have outside access so you can work outside the housing.
- **Deep pine litter** helps to counter some of the microbes. Deep litter needs to stay fairly dry, and you can add more periodically, and shovel out about once every six months or year (depending on your climate). Fresh dirt can counter others. Dirt is high in microbes that fight unhealthy pathogens.
- **Healthy diet for handler** – If you are healthy, you are less prone to irritations and illnesses.
- **Wear filter mask** when cleaning pens – If you have allergies, use a HEPA mask when doing anything that will stir up dust.
- **Locate pigeon house away from residence** – Traditionally people kept Pigeons in their attics and in Lofts off the sides of their houses. Many people still do. If you are concerned, or have sensitive family members, simply locate your Pigeon housing away from your residence.
- **Large flight pens** and spaces (avoid concentration of allergens). Overcrowding is more likely to cause problems, especially if overcrowding occurs on dirt. Dirt is a healthy option, but overcrowding will make it hazardous faster than overcrowding on other surfaces if the surface is not raked and refreshed regularly.
- **Plants in the pens** use the nitrogen, counteracting risks. If you keep growing things in your flight pens, the soil stays healthier, and more balanced, reducing the risks of contaminants building up. Rotating growing frames can help with this effort.
- **Bathing** – bring a bath in for the Pigeons, so they can clean themselves. Keep the water out of their housing, where it may dampen the litter. Offer them the chance to bathe daily, and they'll stay cleaner and healthier. This is also a means to tell whether a bird is sick – healthy birds will bathe! Sick birds can be removed and isolated to help contain the spread of disease.

Just so we really understand here. Under normal circumstances, the risks are not all that great to begin with, and these things can minimize them to the point where they are well within what is reasonable. **The one exception to this is someone who is immune compromised – some conditions spread by farm animals which healthy people don't even notice, can be deadly to them.** You'd have to make a choice for yourself about whether the risks are containable enough, depending on the degree of immune compromise.

In most cases, if someone does develop an illness, it is treatable. If they develop a sensitivity to dander or

feathers, the solution is to simply avoid close contact with the Pigeons. If you have other bird allergies, you may be more likely to be allergic to Pigeons.

Of the elements above, the most important two are to keep the interior floor dry, and keep good ventilation in the housing. Those two things do more than anything else to keep you, and your birds, healthy and happy.



Great Loads of Guano

So I take a little liberty with the word “guano” here, but the definition is close enough that it is not entirely inaccurate! Bird droppings, from Pigeons or seabirds, are used for the same purposes, both historically, and contemporarily.

As we mentioned previously, Pigeon dung, manure, poop, waste, droppings, etc, have value! They are a great source of nitrogen and phosphorus. As such, they are useful as a fertilizer, and were at one time used as a source of saltpeter (used to make gunpowder).

Today, bird manure (including chicken manure) is often used as a compost accelerator, to speed the composting process. It does that because it generates heat, due to the nitrate concentration.

It can be used for three specific salable products also: Straight composted Pigeon manure, Mixed composted Pigeon manure, and vermicomposted Pigeon manure. All three have a good sale value, of between \$1 and \$2 for a 5 lb bag – perhaps more by the time this is published.

It can be used as fertilizer in two principle ways:

1. **For your garden, or to sell.** Gather out the droppings when you clean their housing.
2. **For growing frames and plants in the Pigeon flight pen.** As stated, plants are one of the primary means of reducing risks in the soil, to keep from creating the conditions in which dangerous microbes can grow. By letting the droppings naturally compost in the pen (raking out the surface layer now and again), you reduce the risks, and you allow the birds to feed the plants, which in turn, feed the Pigeons.

If you USE the manure, it is not a problem. If you do not, it becomes a problem fairly rapidly. I doubt you'll ever have to guard your coops to keep the neighbors from stealing it as they did a few hundred years ago, but chances are your neighbors will appreciate it if you give them a little crap now and again – Pigeon, of course!

If you want to make gunpowder from Pigeon poo, you are on your own!



Refining Your Breeding Stock

Breeding and genetics are a complicated subject, but there are some simple principles which can be outlined that can help you in making progress to improve a breed line for specific traits.

First, there are always trade-offs. Many Pigeon breeders will line breed – that is, they'll breed closely related birds in order to concentrate the favorable traits. Doing this though, may produce champion racers or show birds, but it reduces hardiness, disease resistance and productivity. Exactly the things you need for good utility birds. So in concentrating one set of traits, always consider what you might be losing in the process.

Second, cross breeds generally have greater productivity, hardiness, disease resistance, and can produce larger and faster growing young. Maintaining a good cross breed program though, requires that you also maintain two, or more, purebred lines, because the benefits of cross breeding tend to fade within a few generations. This is one reason why new breeds do so much better than specialized older breeds in some ways – because the initial benefit of the original crosses used to establish the breed have not totally faded.

The other reason why new breeds often do better than old ones is that they may still be used for their intended purpose, and hence, maintained for their intended purpose. Most established breeds are rapidly taken over by those who breed for show, and show judges just cannot resist the urge to look at pretty and ignore function. You always lose utility when that happens, as people breed for more and more extreme examples of the breed, and lose functional qualities in the process.

For meat birds, the most important things are:

1. **Productivity** – do the birds produce consistently high numbers of young?
2. **Survivability** – do the young survive well?
3. **Parenting Ability** – do the parents care for their young well?
4. **Squab Size and Growth** – do the young grow well and reach a satisfactory size by the time they are butchered?
5. **Disease Resistance** – are your birds healthy and do they require low amounts of medical intervention?
6. **Hardiness** – can they survive varying temperatures and conditions easily?
7. **Temperament** – are they well behaved enough that fighting does not cause losses of birds, or increases in medical costs?

Many people focus solely on the size of the squabs. That is a mistake. It is better to have average sized squabs, with good birds that consistently produce, than inconsistently produced large squabs.

Good breeders will often breed from two distinct lines, one with outstanding parenting capabilities, and one with outstanding squab size, or something like that, to bring out the best in both. What you do not want to do, is end up breeding two lines that share the same faults, because those will tend to be emphasized. The catch is, that often when you breed two birds with similar strengths, they will also have similar faults! This is sort of a built-in drawback to breeding to strengthen certain kinds of traits.

In general, when you have a colony of reasonably good breeders, you can enhance the breed simply by culling those birds that do not meet your standards. With Pigeons in a Colony setting, this often means selling or dispatching pairs that do not produce up to your standards. Culling is often not done well in the majority of farms, when it should be the first tactic used to improve and maintain a good breed.

- **Any obvious defects require culling from the breeding pool.** Yes, this seems like a no-brainer, but it is astonishing how often breeders negligently (or “compassionately”) ignore this vital principle.
- **The best young should be saved** for future breeders.
- **The worst breeders** (after 1-2 years max) should be culled.
- **Mediocre birds should not be sold as breeders.**
- **Birds with medical problems**, who have ever been eggbound, who have got sick when other birds did not, who have difficulties with climate conditions sooner than other birds, or who are otherwise not as strong, should be removed from the breeding pool.
- **Birds with defects in any of the areas we listed in the first bullet list above should be culled.** Chicks that do not fully hatch, or that need help should NOT be kept as breeders. Birds that have a high number of chicks that need help hatching should be culled from the breeding pool.
- **All birds that are DESCENDED from any bird that later has problems that may be affected by genetics should also be removed from your breeding pool** – This does not make them unfit for squab production, only unfit for continuing to use them in a breeding program to improve the line.
- **Birds which require a specialized diet to produce well should be culled!** This is one of the most often overlooked elements. Feed your birds a natural forage diet, and it will be more affordable for you. If you purchase domesticated birds that have been bred in captivity for many generations, you may find that this trait has been bred out, and you may need to breed it back in. It is worth doing.

Early superiority can be harder to judge with meat pigeons, because you butcher the squabs before you can really tell whether they possess the traits you want or not, so selecting the best ones to raise for future breeders is often a bit of a guessing game – we tend to aim for visible traits such as size. As long as we are willing to cull later when undesirable traits are manifest, we can still improve the lines.

With meat birds especially, inbreeding is not a terribly good idea. You end up losing too much in the process. Once in a while, to achieve a specific goal is acceptable, but you don't want to do it very much, because you'll lose traits that will end up costing you in the long run. If you find that you are not able to stabilize traits that you want, or get rid of undesirable traits, or that the quality is degrading over time, a little new blood, carefully chosen, can help to balance out the traits and bring a little bit of renewed vigor to your lines. Again, racing and show breeders will sometimes recommend AGAINST this, but their goals are different than yours. Health and self-sufficiency in your birds is far more important than it is with theirs, so their methods aren't going to work for breeding meat birds.

If you really want to improve a breed line, you have to be scrupulous about culling. You can't breed in a blatant negative trait just because you really like the bird.

With some animals, you sell or butcher the culls. You can do that with Pigeons, but you don't have to, because you can still breed them for squab production or egg production. It isn't an all or nothing thing. You just select your FUTURE breeding stock from the best ones, and track lineage along with production so you know which ones to combine, based on past performance and family line strengths.

Even if you do not practice selective breeding, good culling practices, and good selection of breeders will accomplish 95% of the same results from natural pairings. Just make sure you do not select future breeders from pairs with negative histories.

I do cover Preservation Breeding later, but will remark here that it is all the more important that you cull scrupulously if you are trying to preserve a heritage breed or endangered breed. While you do need to make exceptions due to scarcity, obvious defects MUST be culled from the breeding pool. If they are not, your efforts will be destroyed by carelessness, and you'll fail to preserve the qualities that

made the breed worth preserving in the first place.

In pretty much EVERY valid guide on breeding that you read, you'll hear the mantra of "cull, cull, cull" over and over. There is a reason why you keep hearing it, and it is because there are top breeders who FOLLOW this rule scrupulously, and then there is everybody else. A good many will cull sometimes – but still let emotion get in the way. And then the average person won't really cull for anything other than gross deformities. They'll overlook things that they should NOT be passing on, and excuse them based on affection or some other justification.

Honestly, I don't care if you DID pull this one from the egg yourself and hand feed it and nurse it through an illness and protect it from all the bullies! All of those are STRONG reasons to NOT leave it in the breeding pool. Keep it as a pet. Bring it in the house if you want. Let it follow you around the farm. But don't make it your prize mommy or daddy Pigeon.

You don't have to be heartless, but you do have to be calmly analytical and objective about the things you need, and about removing breeders that don't meet the standards you are trying to achieve. The ability to do that is what separates excellent breeders from mediocre ones.

We have a LOT of very average breeding stock being sold by people who tout their breeding practices as being superior (some citing educational credentials), when in fact their breeding philosophies and practices are worlds apart – **they practice little better breeding standards than the average County Fair heifer owner.**

If you want your flocks to actually improve, you have to be diligent, and you can't get careless. Your philosophy and your practices have to actually align, and you have to be scrupulous about culling when it is called for, even when you'd rather not.

Because Pigeons mature at a fairly early age, and because they produce so heavily, you can improve a breed, or even stabilize a new breed much faster than you can with, say, cattle or even goats. If you end up investing in a line that proves to have problems, you lose less than you do with animals that are slower to breed as well. Pigeons breed rapidly enough to simplify the long term perspective considerably.

You'll be told over and over to start with the best breeding stock you can afford. Of course, you are told this by people who sell EXPENSIVE birds! The catch is, you can't KNOW before you buy, the true quality of the birds! You can see if they are good specimens of the breed by appearance. You may get a chance to see squabs or eggs, but usually not. **Chances are, you'll have to go by appearance, and you will have only the seller's word for issues such as health, productivity, age, etc.**

Even honest sellers unintentionally mislead about these things! If you ask about the health of his lofts, he may say they are very healthy. But very healthy to him may mean he loses birds and treats illnesses far more than YOU think he should for having healthy birds. They sometimes mix up other data as well.

Breeding out negative traits is difficult. Taking a good bird and making it better is not very hard. Taking a bad one and trying to make it good is a long climb. Choose your birds as best you can, and be ready to try again if the ones you get don't quite live up to your expectations and can't be improved sufficiently.

Be sure to start out with birds that are not too inbred also. Go to more than one supplier if you have to (or one large enough, with good enough record keeping to assure you of the relationship status between the pairs, both within pairs, and with other pairs that you buy from them). You not only do not want a pair that are related to each other, but if you start out with a limited number of birds, you really don't want those birds related to the other pairs, so you have a wider genetic diversity to work with. This improves your chances of getting some good birds, and it enables you to produce unrelated offspring to

increase your flocks. In this way, even three pairs can provide a good foundation stock.

Genetics are complicated, and can sometimes produce unexpected results on combining them. But BREEDING really ISN'T complicated. Try it. If it works, keep doing it. If it doesn't work, stop and try again. Don't keep what you don't want, and don't let it get too inbred or it deteriorates. Just make those choices consistently, regardless of how you FEEL about it, and breeding is simple.

That is the real key to taking good stock and keeping it good, or making it even better.



Pigeon Eggs

Yes, they are edible. Yes, they are eaten as food in Asia. No, they are typically not raised specifically for eggs, but you can do so if you want, with an understanding of the differences between egg production in pigeons and chickens.

Pigeon eggs are bigger than a quail egg, up to the size of bantam eggs, depending on the breed of pigeon. When cooked, the white is more transparent than the white of other eggs, and is a bit more rubbery. Flavor depends largely on feed – if you feed it garbage, the eggs may not be all that great. By garbage, I do not mean table scraps, or garden surplus or anything like that. I mean chemically laced trash food.

Pigeons lay an egg every other day when breeding, and if eggs are removed, they will keep laying. They won't lay daily. Hens that are of breeding age which are unmated (isolated from males) will lay eggs, just as chickens do. Whether they'll do so to the same extent as chickens (with the same frequency) is not well documented. Pigeons will produce all year if given good quarters (no drafts in winter, not too hot in summer), so it is likely that unmated hens will do the same.

This means it is possible to set up egg production pens for spinster pigeons to produce infertile eggs for market sales if one had the desire to experiment with it. It is probably also possible to breed for better egg production.

There are those who say that egg laying is very wearing to the hen, so she should not be pressed to lay continuously, but egg laying really is not more strenuous than feeding young or incubating eggs. Given a good diet of free choice foods, most utility hens would be capable of producing eggs long term.

It would seem that there might be a place for this in a well run pigeon farm. Once you get a certain number of breeding pairs, you need to keep replacements on hand in case of death of one party or the other. If the breeding age young were separated, the hens might be induced to lay infertile eggs until they were needed, with accommodations that provided a nest box for each hen (they are still more territorial than chickens). The better layers over a period of time might then be used for breeding. If the majority of young cocks are butchered and hens reserved, there might be a good opportunity for a sideline of egg production along side of squabs, though early gender determination is only really practical with auto-sexing breeds.

Financially, if a dozen eggs can be sold for around the same price as one squab, it would be financially as lucrative as raising squabs. Even if they sell for less, they would probably be worth it if you were using young hens that were waiting a breeding nest. I think, due to rarity, and familiarity in Asian cuisine, they may sell for a little more than quail eggs in the Asian markets in the US. Calculations based on production of two squabs from two birds compared with production of the eggs from a single hen within the same time that two birds can produce two squabs. So one bird produces one squab, and one hen lays so many eggs instead, for probably about the same amount of feed.

Laying pigeons may need more nuts in their diet (to provide the oils and fat soluble vitamins contained in the eggs), and you'd need to make sure they had free choice calcium at all times. An assortment of fresh vegetables would also help enrich the yolks. Regular foods with Vitamin A may help increase egg production.

Pigeons used to be raised for both eggs and squabs, so we aren't exactly treading on completely new territory, even though keeping them selectively for eggs is not something you'll see described in commonly available sources. This also means there is great leeway for experimentation and innovation.

Pigeon eggs are good food, and should be brought back as good food, if only for the reason that we NEED good food sources that are easy to raise in this changing world. Pigeons are easy on the

environment, easy to feed, and give back enough that the eggs end up just being a bonus when you raise them right. If you work it well, the bonus can be quite a good one.



Finding Breeding Stock

I realize that you need me to say something more useful than “good luck with that!”, so I’ll explain some of the realities of purchasing good breeding stock for Utility Pigeons and then give you some ideas.

If you are looking for chickens, or quail, or even various kinds of exotic Pheasants, you can Google it and find hatcheries that sell eggs, chicks, or juvenile or even adult birds. **It isn’t so simple with Pigeons.** They are raised in smaller lofts, sold only as juvenile or adult birds, rarely as eggs, and never as chicks, due to the feeding requirements. Baby Pigeons CAN be fed by hand, and some places do sell a Pigeon Milk replacement, but it is not easy to raise a Pigeon by hand, and survival rates are just not what they are with a real set of Pigeon parents.

Commercial facilities for raising Pigeons are still relatively uncommon in the US, and they mostly raise squabs, not breeders. It is my guess that this may change, if homesteaders figure out how valuable Pigeons can be in part of a polyculture farming synergy.

This means there just are not any good sources in the US for Meat Pigeons that are nationally advertised. You find small breeders with backyard flocks, on places like Backyardchickens.com, and on other self-sufficiency forums. You may also find breeders locally, once you start asking.

Start Googling, using different combinations of terms. Then start following leads – you’ll find breeders here and there, some of whom will have gone out of business and stopped raising Pigeons as circumstances in their lives changed. **Avoid show birds** – but realize that some sellers of show birds may have good utility birds in the background, so do ask.

Search for Utility or Meat birds, specifically, or you tend to end up shuffled off into racing Pigeon and show Pigeon lofts.

Local is always best, because you can actually see the birds, see the conditions they are raised within, view offspring, see the general health of the flocks, etc. You can’t do that with long distance purchases, and you end up having to take someone’s word for it. As mentioned in the previous chapter, even when they are being honest, they might not live up to your expectations if your idea of healthy birds is different than the seller’s idea of healthy birds.

Pigeons can be shipped across the US. Make sure the breeder knows what they are doing though, because otherwise they’ll die in transit. Expect to pay an average of \$80 for this (on top of the cost of the birds), because it takes special boxes, and expedited shipping.

What you start out with may end up being more a matter of what you can GET, than what you really want. That’s ok though, because GETTING started is the thing. Once you are going, you can acquire additional birds as the opportunity presents. Even if you start out with a marginal breed, chances are, you can make something of it, and learn a lot about care and feeding, and figure out some things to optimize production that you might not have figured out if you started with better birds. Learning opportunities benefit you in the long term, and will benefit your better birds when you do get them.

It is possible to import birds from other countries. In general, they have to come through Canada, because Canada has quarantine facilities for domestic animal imports, and the US does not. It is an expensive proposition, so you would not be able to do this unless you had a significant financial investment behind it, and an equally compelling reason for doing so. So, while it is POSSIBLE, it is not practical for most people to contemplate.

Persistence in searching online, and offline, will help you in acquiring good birds to start your Pigeon flock.



Interflocking

So one of the questions that always comes up is, “Can I raise my Pigeons in with my chickens?” (or some other poultry). The answer is:

Maybe.

You really feel informed now, don't you! But let me explain.

Pigeon experts recommend against it – the reasons were of an unpersuasive enough nature that I can't even remember them long enough to write them down, usually a lot of mumbling about Pigeons being Pigeons and not chickens and not liking to share. **The USDA recommends against it.** Their reasoning is that birds spread disease, and therefore, two kinds of birds will spread more disease than one kind of bird, which is complete nonsense, **they are basing this on introducing, for example, a turkey from one industrial farm to a mass of chickens from another industrial farm, where we have two completely unnatural disease pools combining in a completely unnatural setting which just happens to be ideally organized for mass destruction** in the event that it comes in contact with any kind of even mild illness. Risks are totally different, and far SMALLER on a polyculture farm.

Mostly, people have a few chickens, and a bigger coop than their chickens need, and want to know if they can add a few Pigeons. It has been done successfully. Pigeons will often take the top nest boxes if they are placed high on the wall, and if there are enough of them. Pigeons do require a covered run, if you don't want them to forage wild. **Chickens and Pigeons both will establish a pecking order – this is actually the unspoken reason why many Pigeon breeders recommend against it, because they are breeding specialty birds, and they do not want to risk having their prize Pigeons beaten up by an angry chicken.** But that can go either way! Pigeons are not intimidated by chickens, and can hold their own. You just have to be willing to see how the pecking order re-establishes during the first week or two, between the two species.

There are compelling reasons to ask questions about interflocking, beyond just the desire to not have to build another coop if you don't have to.

When you set the goal of developing an integrated polyculture farm, you start out by realizing that plants grow best with other plants in harmonious combinations, you then realize that animals and plants grow best together, and then you realize that many animals actually grow best in a group of more than just their own kind, and in harmony with crops as well.

There is one overriding principle which makes it ALL work: **Avoid overcrowding.** No matter what you choose to combine, **if you crowd things without making an adjustment to compensate, you'll strip the land of resources, batter the birds, and end up with disaster.** With the right combinations, you can get more out of the land, even at a fairly intense loading ratio (not like a feedlot though!), by intelligent synergistic combinations.

Pigeons can fit into that. It is probably EASIEST just to keep them in their own lofts where you can feed them food that is best for them, but **they can live well on chicken feed, with additional scratch grain – this assumes you give your chickens plenty of greens to provide minerals.** Many of their requirements are the same as for chickens, so the adjustments are actually minimal.

Pigeons also become part of the whole synergy of the farm. They clean up spilled feed that other animals tend to overlook, the same way Muscovy Ducks will do, keeping the populations of rats and mice lower.

Interflocking will also result in enhanced disease resistance over the long term, if you are careful about

how you combine them, and keep from overcrowding them. **Overcrowding is most likely when you combine two animals that occupy a similar niche, such as Pigeons and Chickens.**

You can also combine them with ducks, much as you do chickens. Usually, the ducks will simply ignore the Pigeons, unless they are competing for space, which won't happen if your Pigeons have high nest boxes, and your ducks have larger nest boxes, and if you have sufficient floor or roosting space (Most ducks do not roost, but Muscovy Ducks will appreciate roosts). Pigeons love water, just as Ducks do, though Ducks swim, and Pigeons merely bathe.

Interflocking can help you to make better use of your space and resources, if it is done wisely. The nutritional needs of all the animals must be considered, and is honestly easier to manage if you are NOT using commercial feed. **If you scatter grains, make bugs or meat protein sources available, and provide plenty of greens, each will take the things they love, and ignore what is not in their diet the same as they would in the wild. Just make sure you provide enough of each.**

Farmers used to allow Pigeons to inhabit their barns, because they could harvest squabs from them, and the Pigeons would help keep things cleaned up a bit, and feed on the land around. They were useful for more than just meat. **Pigeons are healthier to have around than rats and mice.** Between Pigeons for cleanup, and cats for rodent control, that kind of vermin need not be a problem at all.

Because of the loss of interest in raising Pigeons for meat, there isn't a lot of available information on raising them with other animals or birds. Common sense, combined with anecdotal information and historical information tells us though, that it is worth trying, and that it can succeed well, just as raising chickens with ducks and geese works well (and is indeed the traditional farmyard method of raising them). You can bet there were Pigeons feeding with them in earlier times as well, because Pigeons are opportunists with food, and any time fowl are being fed, Pigeons will be there to enjoy the bounty if they are not fenced out.

Go ahead and give it a try. Just see to the space needs of everybody, see that your Pigeons have a place to defend as their space, and make sure the nutritional needs are met on a community basis, and don't let the naysayers make you feel like an amateur for trying it. As stated already, most Pigeon breeders are NOT raising meat birds for self-sufficiency, and even those who are, are often doing so based on available Pigeon rearing instructional material, which is not specific to meat birds, but to sport and show birds. The closer you mimic nature, the more confidence you may have that it will not only work, but work resoundingly well.



Butchering Pigeons

Nothing graphic, folks. This isn't precisely about how to whack the heads and pull the guts. You can find instructions and diagrams, and even videos on doing that online, and it is the same as butchering a chicken, in miniature. Pigeons are, in fact, about the same size as a Cornish Game Hen. **This is about all the other issues regarding butchering that aren't really covered in most butchering guides.**

Yes, I call it "butchering". You can call it "harvesting", or "slaughtering", or "dressing", or whatever else you want to call it, but it is, after all, killing and gutting an animal. Things die. Things have to die for us to eat them. No point trying to be delicate about the words, it is what it is.

Pigeon squabs are butchered at about 18 days of age. Some people say to do them 1-2 days earlier for more tender meat – but you lose a significant portion of size when you do that, because Pigeons grow eye-poppingly fast during those first few weeks.

You can also butcher them a few days later, with only a little loss in tenderness. They do get tougher by the day though, and if they are fully fledged, it is too late to butcher them as "Squab", and they'll go for the stew pot instead.

Pigeons can be butchered at any age. They are edible at any age. Older ones are tougher, best stewed, then cut up, and consumed in small bites with foods that bring out the flavor but which do not concentrate on the texture.

When you butcher an animal, you want to make sure that you use everything you can from it, or return it to the earth if you do not. That means if you cannot use it, then bury it, or burn it (use a closed stove, or a patio stove if you are in town). The ashes are good for gardening. What you want to avoid, is throwing animal scraps in the dumpster. It doesn't do anyone any good in a landfill.

First, the good stuff.

Pigeon Squabs are either plucked and dressed out, to make a bird that looks a lot like a Cornish Hen, or they are breasted out – just the breast is plucked, skinned, and cut out, either with, or without the bones. Either way you choose to do it, find uses for as much of the rest of the bird as you can – it is better for your farm if you do!

Save out the liver, and if you like any other gibblets, save those too.

Feathers can be plucked, treated, and saved, or they can be composted, burned, or buried.

Other remains can be used for dog, cat, pig, mink, ferret, fish, crawdad, turtle, or other carnivore or omnivore food. They can also be used for Black Soldier Fly larvae feed, or to feed other forms of insects to create feed for your chickens and ducks. Don't leave the scraps where they will attract predators and scavengers though.

Butcher indoors if you are in town. Don't offend your neighbor's sensibilities, they may retaliate in a way that you won't like. Be respectful and no one needs to know what you are doing.

Butchering is not something that most people enjoy. Indeed, it should not be! There has not been ONE TIME when we have not felt saddened by the task. But we do it, because it is part of the cycle of life, and living. It is done respectfully, and efficiently so our animals do not suffer. They are handled as kindly as we can. Butchering at home is not the mechanical distanced cold and unthinking thing of the commercial food industry. There is a sense of mourning attached to the day. But a great sense of gratitude also. From this, we have food to sustain our lives. It is not taken lightly, and it is the part we dislike most. As it always should be.

My husband and I have a deal – I will cut up anything, as long as it is MEAT when it gets to me. I never wanted to have to handle anything that still had a head and fur or feathers. So he would do the slaughtering, skinning, and gutting, I would cut them up. Kevin helps with the cutting up of larger game as well (so do our kids), because it is just a lot of work.

We rarely pluck poultry, we pretty much always skin them if we can. That may change when we move to another phase of self-sufficiency though, because sources of natural fats on a self-sufficient farm are limited, and when you eat a totally natural diet without processed foods that have hidden fats, you find that you actually NEED the fats contained in traditional foods. Skinning is simply easier than plucking, and I have never wanted to have to deal with nasty oozy pinfeathers.

I have found that as time goes on, I am more comfortable with skinning, and even with some gutting tasks. I usually get handed the gut bucket to separate out the livers anyway. I still never want to have to actually slaughter an animal. Kevin does that, as his role as husband and father. I don't have problems with women who feel they can slaughter an animal – if I had to for survival, I would step up and do it. But for now, Kevin shields me from that, both of us feeling it is better for us that way.

We have required our children to help with butchering in one way or another, just as a part of life. But we have never forced them to do things they felt they could not. No child, male or female, is required to assist with slaughtering, and no child is forced to help cut up the meat as such. If they feel unable to do that, they can sharpen knives, or get dinner ready while the rest of us are working on butchering. As long as they are helping out equally, it works. Most of our kids have not objected strongly to helping cut up meat. They didn't like to, because it is a lot of work, but it wasn't because of squeamishness. Most of our boys just dove right in – I think it is that male “give me the knife, I can do this” instinct. The only time I wondered if I COULD cut up an animal, was when an antelope came in when I was pregnant. I prayed like anything that it would be a good one, and not a gamey sagey one. I am thankful to this day that the antelope they brought in was not a smelly gamey one. Poultry usually smells less by the time it gets to the kitchen, it is mostly the entrails that smell, so it is usually easier to handle.

Butchering outside keeps the odor down while eviscerating, but again, whether you can do that depends upon where you are. A well-ventilated shed is a good option if you cannot butcher outside.

Involving the kids in the process helps them to learn about life, and how to be independent and self-sufficient. It also teaches them a good deal about history, anatomy, and about animal life and biology in general. Overall, I don't think there is a one of our kids who will say they enjoyed it. I doubt they have ever thought about what they learned from it, but as they get older they are more appreciative that they learned how to do it. Some are even proud that they have, and their friends have not done such things.

It isn't the part that will ever be your favorite part. But it is the part that turns your work raising Squabs into a life sustaining package in your freezer.



Down and Feathers

Pigeon feathers have traditionally been used as a substitute for goose or duck feathers, and the smaller feathers in the same manner as down. The larger feathers have been used for crafts and compost. The craft market for larger feathers is more varied now than it was in previous centuries.

You may find that there are negative attitudes about Pigeon feathers, since they usually contain mites that will eat holes in the feathers. This is only a problem for those who do not know what to do about it – if the mites are eliminated, the feathers will last as well as any other feathers. Indeed, most bird feathers can have this kind of problem (waterbirds produce oil which prevents the mites, but the oil causes issues of its own). Proper treatment eliminates the mites from bird feathers.

To kill mites, freeze the feathers for 24 hours, leave at room temperature for 24 hours (to let any remaining live eggs hatch), and then freeze for another 24 hours. That's it.

You might wonder why Pigeon feathers were used historically, if they had this problem. They didn't have a deep freeze to stick the things in to kill the mites, after all! But they didn't really have central heating either. At some point, the feathers would end up freezing. They were less likely to save feathers from the summer anyway, because they were less desirable, given that feathers are in their worst condition right before the moult.

Pigeons have two kinds of down also, one type is referred to as Powder Down, because the feathers never moult, they simply wear away into powder over time. The powder is thought to help with feather condition and skin condition. This means that when used for pillows, some of the feathers will gradually wear away and turn to dust. The amount of problem this would cause would depend a lot on how the feathers were sorted, and what percentage of Powder Down feathers were included in the mix. Typically they would not be sorted out specifically, but smaller feathers (not down) are often included, which would affect the percentage of Powder Down feathers.

There are sources that buy Pigeon Feathers. A commercial processor that I read about in California sells Pigeon feathers for \$2 per lb to a commercial buyer. \$2 per lb is NOT easy money. A pound of feathers is about a tightly packed plastic grocery sack full. You have to pluck an awful lot of Pigeons to get a pound of feathers! This means that if you want to sell them to a wholesale buyer, you aren't gonna make enough to bother unless you have a huge operation and you are just selling them because it is easier to move them out that way than to use them some other way.

You can get considerably more for them if you sort them and sell them direct to customers yourself. Sort down, small pillow feathers, small craft feathers, and flight and tail feathers. They may be dyed for craft use also, but there is a good market for naturally colored feathers, and for white ones that people can dye themselves. You'll move them more slowly, and the orders will be less predictable, but you can get far more for them. A small bag of feathers goes for about \$1-2 on craft supply sites. Be generous and give people a good deal, and they'd rather come to you for them.

Feathers should be stored out of sunlight, and should always be treated before you store them.

You can wash the feathers, and you can do it in the washing machine. Put them in a zipper close organza laundry bag – check for holes each time, you don't want them to leak feathers during the cycle. Do not overfill the bag, make sure the feathers can move around easily in it, you want it less tightly packed than a feather pillow. Load the washing machine with bags, make sure it is balanced. Use about 1/3 the amount of detergent that you'd usually use, and set the machine on the delicate cycle.

They can be dried in the dryer also. Make sure the bags are secure before you toss them in, and fluff the feathers to break apart clumps. Add some clean tennis shoes or tennis balls to the load to

help keep them fluffed. Run on medium heat, for 15 minutes. Fluff the pillows, and repeat as many times as necessary to fully dry the feathers.

If you are selling feathers to people who may be allergic to laundry products, be careful about what kind of detergent you use. Soapwort is a good choice for natural detergent.

Feathers aren't a primary reason to raise Pigeons, but they can be a useful side product.



Wedding Doves

Any time you talk about raising Pigeons, someone will chime in with the idea of doing dove releases at Weddings. For a wedding, they always want white. Colors are just not appreciated. Pigeons and Doves being the same species, it is really Pigeons that are released. But not just any white Pigeon will do.

They must be good homing Pigeons. MOST Pigeons have the homing instinct, but a homing Pigeon is not just released occasionally, but they are allowed to fly regularly, and are transported and released regularly so they are used to returning home. The whole point is that they DO return home, so you can use them again.

Usually they are brought to the event in baskets, which are strategically located, and released on a specified signal – often the bride will be given a dove to hold in her hands and release, then other doves will be released from the baskets.

There are those who feel it is a lucrative business, but make no mistake, you will earn the money. At an average of \$250 per release (depending on distance, number of birds, season, etc), it makes a good sideline to another business, but may not be a sole profit line unless you have a fairly large operation.

Most weddings are on weekends. Big ones tend to always be on Saturdays, so your weekends tend to be booked up. It takes at least one person to supervise the release, so you are limited in what you can EARN, by your time and availability. You really can't fit in more than a few per weekend, at most, if you live near a major metro area where there would be enough weddings to have that kind of demand. It is kind of a specialized thing, so getting steady bookings would be difficult.

You need a minimum of about 30-50 birds to have any kind of impressive impact. That is a lot of extra birds to keep around if you are not already doing so for other reasons.

You can't use your breeders either. You have to use birds that are not currently breeding or nursing young.

Homing flyers don't make the best meat birds. So many times when people start talking about using meat birds as wedding doves, they really don't know beans about Pigeons. Homing Pigeons have provided culling stew meat, and some surplus squab for families for centuries, but they are not considered to be as good at providing meat and eggs as are true Utility Pigeons.

When you are producing meat, your breeders are pretty much kept continuously busy laying, brooding, and nursing young. You can't just yank them off the nest and haul them away to a wedding and expect them to find their way back to the nest without disrupting the production of meat or eggs. So you have to maintain essentially a separate flock for wedding doves.

Most released birds will find their way home, but a few will become prey to hawks, fall to accidents or injuries, or just get lost and not find their way home (it does happen from time to time). You have to be prepared to lose a few each release. Further distances mean greater potential losses.

The bottom line here is that if someone suggests that you open a sideline doing wedding releases, realize what it means to do so, and make sure that if you find the idea appealing (including keeping a separate flock), that you do your research and make sure that the markets exist in your area to support the keeping of the birds, and the time you'll invest providing the service. Talk to Wedding Planners, and see if they are interested and in need. They will generally be able to let you know how things stand fairly accurately.

On the other hand, if you pick up some Pigeons, and happen to know people in the industry who start begging you to provide wedding doves, it may just be an opportunity. **It just WON'T be an opportunity for your meat birds.** Pick up some good quality white homing pigeons for the job if you want it to work.



Preserving Endangered Utility Breeds

We touched on this topic earlier in the book, but it bears some special attention as a topic by itself. We are involved in the preservation of both animal, plant, and fungal species, as well as the preservation of heritage skills, and we care deeply about these issues.

Our experiences with breeders of “heritage” breeds, who have claimed to be breeding them to preserve the species, has not necessarily been good. We find too many that are careless. Some intentionally so. Others merely unaware that their animals are not the quality they think they are simply because they are not breeding them for the utility that they were originally created to capture. There are a range of issues, which I will try to achieve some coherency in describing!

- **Failure to cull defective animals.** If an animal is born with defects, it should be culled from the breeding pool. It should NOT be sold as a breeder, nor should the owner be expected to use it to perpetuate the breed. If it is not a good specimen, it should not be used to preserve the breed.
- **Failure to isolate breeds for breeding.** Often we find heritage breed animals thrown in with other breeds. Sometimes the stock owner doesn't even know for certain what breed some of them are. We saw one breeder describing her “Cochins” and her “Campines”. The Cochins had tail feathers that stuck up, and the Campines had green iridescent feathering around the neck and tail. Her poultry ran wild, hatched eggs willy nilly, and she identified the closest characteristics and gave them a breed name when she thought she figured out who the mama and daddy were. Sorry, not acceptable! You have a little more leeway with Pigeons, IF your Pigeons are already mated and bonded when you add them to a Colony. In that case you CAN have mixed breeds within the Colony as long as your PAIRS are not mixed, and as long as you periodically check to ensure that the pairs do not shuffle. This makes it more practical to keep multiple breeds of Pigeons than it is other poultry that do not form pair bonds.
- **Failure to breed selectively.** Once the flock or herd is obtained, they let them run and perpetuate, regardless of the quality that is being produced. Now... nine times out of ten, this will produce average stock, with average characteristics. But with Preservation breeds, often the breed was so close to extinction that it was brought back rather haphazardly to begin with, and NEEDS some improvement. Most commonly, the rescue of the breed focused on visible traits, and neglected temperament, productivity, hardiness, disease resistance, and other less visible characteristics which make up the majority of the value of any utility breed.
- **Failure to cull weaker animals.** People get attached to an animal, and leave them in the breeding pool when they should have removed them. If an animal gets sick when others don't, if they are the runt of the brood or litter, if they did not hatch or birth well, or if they have trouble with hatchability of their eggs or with birthing, they SHOULD NOT be kept in the breeding pool. We see this with goats – people will rush to assist in difficult birthing of purebreds, and will keep kids from hard birthers in their breeding pool and sell them as top animals. They may show well, but they are not useful for small farm production. If you are trying to breed for high productivity and utility, then you have to cull the animals that cost more, are less productive, or which have consistent problems. You have to!
- **Failure to diversify the gene pool.** After a while you need to get some new blood into your genetics. It is costly, but helps keep the productivity, health, and hardiness traits alive. If you get a Cock and a Hen, and raise squabs for a while and then decide that you want to breed a few more, you are going to need another pair that are unrelated. By the time you've bred the offspring of one pair to the offspring of the other, any third generation offspring will all be related to each other. You've got to keep the gene pool varied enough to keep the productivity traits strong, and that means avoiding line breeding unless you are trying to achieve something specific. Otherwise you are just ruining the breed, instead of preserving it. We see this a lot with chickens, where a family just wants to keep the prize rooster, no matter how many generations of incest he is perpetuating, but it is also an issue with Pigeons if you do not track lineage and keep the lines straight.

- **Failure to hand off to someone else.** Many people will breed for a while, then get tired of it. When they do, they'll just butcher off their stock and be done with it, or sell or give them away randomly, without explaining that they are a heritage breed that needs to be preserved. This is one of the factors that causes decline.

I believe strongly in the cause of preserving endangered breeds. The reason that this chapter is in here is because EVERY UTILITY BREED of Pigeons except Kings ARE ENDANGERED! They are listed as "common" in the preservation lists, but they ARE NOT! Just try to find some to buy, and you'll understand! It is very hard to find unrelated stock of some breeds, because they are now so rare!

So I'm not just trying to teach you about preserving rare breeds, I'm asking you to seek them out, and help in the effort, because many breeds of Utility Pigeon are so rare now that bringing them back to use is going to be a challenge, and we need all the help we can get! If it is carelessly done though, it just does more harm than good.

I feel that families and farms need these practical and useful animals more than the world needs one more show breed or fluffy pet. Animals can be so much more useful and functional, and should be valued for their place in the function of the farm. **The dog guards the animals, the pig tills the compost and digs stubborn roots from the soil, the chicken tills the garden, the ducks control bugs, and the geese and guineas sound the alert for intruders. Pigeons clean up feed waste and provide a range of beneficial products to the farm, just as the other animals do.** Farm animals SHOULD have their place of use, and Utility animals especially, because this is what they were bred for. They are more content when they are doing what they were bred to do.

Help preserve the breeds. But do it carefully, and not carelessly. Our world is a better place for these rare preservation breeds that make feeding a family a more achievable task.



About the Author

Laura Wheeler is the mother of eight, and a 12 year veteran web developer turned farmer. Her experience with product development, marketing, online and offline sales is extensive. She has consulted with small business startups through the entire 12 years she worked as a web developer as well.

Laura is the author of more than 40 technical and instructional manuals. She most recently authored **Life from the Garden – Grow Your Own Food Anywhere**.

Laura is a strong supporter of polyculture farming, back to the land, natural farming, and homesteading. She has recovered from Crohn's disease by changing to a more natural diet, and growing as much of her own food as she is able. Pigeons, raised at home, are another part of clean whole food.